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**‘The Efficacy of Song Itself’
Seamus Heaney’s Defence of Poetry**

University of Cape Town

by
Sarah Rowan

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Abstract

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Sarah Rowan, February 2009

The defence of poetry dates back, in English literature, to Sidney’s ‘An Apology for Poetry’ (1595), and the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have seen an increasing number of writers advancing arguments in support of an art form that seems, more than ever, to be under threat. In this thesis, Seamus Heaney’s essays on the purpose of poetry are considered as they constitute a defence of the art form. While Heaney’s poetry and prose have, as a result of his popularity and standing as a poet, generated an almost unprecedented body of critical work, his defence of poetry has not been recognised as such, nor has it come under sufficient critical scrutiny. Essentially a defence of a defence, this thesis redresses that omission by examining Heaney’s apology as it takes shape in his essays, and in its application to a selection of his own poems. It argues that his defence is important not for the originality of its ideas, many of which derive from the work of his predecessors, but for the way in which Heaney combines and interprets those ideas to produce an argument that is uniquely persuasive. His prose style, and the consistent grounding of his argument in examples provided by individual poems, constitute a witness to the pleasure and the potency of the art form which is itself both notably pleasurable and potent.

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Introduction

[Poetry has taught me] that there's such a thing as truth and it can be told – slant; that subjectivity is not to be theorized away and is worth defending; that poetry itself has virtue, in the first sense of possessing a quality of moral excellence and in the sense also of possessing inherent strength by reason of its sheer made-upness, its *integritas*, *consonantia* and *claritas*.

Seamus Heaney, interview with Dennis O'Driscoll¹

I

In 2002, my fourth year of tertiary study at the University of Cape Town, I did a course entitled 'Poetry at the Millennium', in which the status of poetry at the turn of the twentieth century was explored through a variety of texts on the subject. My final assignment for the course entailed selecting, from those we had studied, the defence of poetry that I thought most convincing, and demonstrating in an essay what it was that I found so persuasive about that defence. My chosen reading was Seamus Heaney's 'The Redress of Poetry', and in that assignment lay the seeds of this thesis.

I had determined before reaching university that my doctoral thesis would be on Ted Hughes, a poet whom I had discovered – like so many teenage girls, no doubt – via Sylvia Plath, and whose work I had swiftly come to prefer. By the time I had read him more extensively, however, I had doubts about spending three or four years immersed in his life and poetry: the 'savagery and beautiful bleakness' of that poetry, the necessity of delving into a life characterised by an extraordinary degree of personal tragedy, made me wonder at the wisdom of such a pursuit, at least for someone like myself at this point in my life.² My discovery of Seamus Heaney's defence of poetry, and with it his extraordinary verse – as weighty, as expansive as Hughes', but in a manner quite different – provided me with an alternative preferable for a number of reasons; and when, in 2005, I registered for my PhD, it was with relish at the thought of devoting an extended period of time to Heaney's work. I was, by that stage, an unashamed 'Heaneybopper' – a now common term for members of the poet's prodigious fan base.

¹ Seamus Heaney, *Stepping Stones: Interviews with Seamus Heaney*, ed. D. O'Driscoll, (London: Faber & Faber, 2008), 467.

² Nicci Gerrard, 'The Colossus Diminished: Review of *Ted Hughes: The Life of a Poet* by Elaine Feinstein', *The Observer*, October 28, 2001.
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2001/oct/28/biography.poetry> (January 6, 2009).

‘A man’s theory of the place of poetry,’ T.S. Eliot wrote in ‘Matthew Arnold’, ‘is not independent of his view of life in general’; and Heaney is no exception.³ His background is by no means lacking in tragedy of its own. Growing up in Northern Ireland as a Catholic Derryman, his early life took place in an environment always on the brink of a violence that was ubiquitous and self-perpetuating. As such, his development as a writer took place in a context which made the conflict between poetry and politics very real and very immediate. For all the anguish and difficulty that such issues have caused Heaney, however, he has retained, both as a man and as a writer, an astonishing equilibrium. His domestic life is, by all accounts, tranquil and untouched by scandal. He has been married for forty years, it would appear happily, and for thirty of those has lived, when not abroad, in the same house in Dublin.⁴ The success of his professional life has been measured out in a series of accolades culminating in, but not ending with, the award of the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1995. The public criticism and contention that he has endured – inevitably to do with politics, and his degree of involvement therein – have done little, it seems, to disrupt the balance of his beliefs or principles, and his urge to celebrate life (often in its simplest forms) is undiminished, a basic given of his personality. One’s sense of him is of a man firmly grounded in every sense of that word, both in his preoccupation with the landscape of his native Ireland and, not least, in his assured sense of his vocation as a poet.

That equilibrium, that urge to celebrate, are everywhere present in Heaney’s poetry. As a result, its effect on the reader is uniquely harmonising. The aftertaste of his work is never that which accompanies malaise, however much a sense of disquiet might at times be its point of origin. Those same characteristics are to become, as Eliot might have predicted, the bedrock of Heaney’s defence of poetry: poetry creates balance, it redresses, and in so doing it both defends and extends the mind, the senses. It is the embodiment of joy, first and last. That exuberance is often represented as offensive in the face of tragedy and suffering, as Heaney well knows, and his task as defender is, in large part, to answer that accusation against poetry. As he does so, his passionate conviction as

³ T.S. Eliot, ‘Matthew Arnold’, in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), 119.

⁴ Sam Leith, ‘Return of the Naturalist’. *The Telegraph*, April 16, 2006.

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3651313/Return-of-the-naturalist.html> (December 12, 2008).

to the necessity of poetry – a faith, as he calls it repeatedly, the grounds for which it is the purpose of his defence to reveal – finds expression in passages and images that are very nearly as resonant, as striking, as the greatest moments of his poetry. The strength of Heaney’s defence, I will argue, lies primarily not in its originality. Many of his ideas – as well as the terms that he utilises, the contradictions he attempts to negotiate – find their origin in the work of his literary forebears. Rather, his defence is extraordinary because of his ability to interweave those ideas as no other defender of poetry has done; to select and set side-by-side quotations from a wide and sometimes unexpected range of thinkers. In so doing, Heaney displays his prose style at its most virtuosic. As we will also see, the importance of the energy, vividness and acuity of that style, the poetic and metaphoric verve of his essays, cannot be overestimated in its contribution to the quality and status of his defence.

II

It is surprising, therefore, that work dealing with Heaney’s defence of poetry is all but absent from the body of critical literature on the poet – a body which is unprecedented in size. ‘By now,’ one recent critic has said, ‘the number of specialising [*sic*] books on Heaney is too large to itemise because it is likely to be out of date as soon as it is published ... No other current poet is nearly as much written about as Heaney has been’.⁵ Most of that literature, of course, deals with the poetry itself, while touching on Heaney’s general statements about the art as an introductory measure to analyses of his verse. Helen Vendler’s definitive study, entitled simply *Seamus Heaney*, is one such book. In her introduction, Vendler makes it clear that she has not commented on Heaney’s prose for reasons of length; she does, however, go on to quote from *The Government of the Tongue* in the concluding paragraphs of the introduction, as a means of demonstrating Heaney’s attitude to the lyric form.⁶

Neil Corcoran’s *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study* – still one of the best-known studies on Heaney – devotes, uncommonly, a section to a discussion of Heaney as essayist. Corcoran does not, however, engage with Heaney’s prose specifically

⁵ Bernard O’Donoghue, ‘Introduction’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 2.

⁶ Helen Vendler, ‘Introduction’, in *Seamus Heaney*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1998), 5, 11-12.

as it defends poetry; his is, instead, a broad examination of Heaney as critic, which focuses on Heaney's readings of other poets as much as it does on his own conception of poetry.⁷ Similarly, Peter McDonald's chapter on 'Seamus Heaney as Critic' in *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature* concentrates on Heaney's facility as a critic of poetry, rather than the general poetic principles which he extracts from such readings.⁸ In his more recent *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill*, McDonald discusses in some detail Heaney's notion of redress as articulated in his Oxford Lectures, but McDonald is preoccupied – to critically interesting effect – with Heaney's argument as expressed in the very public context of his position as Professor of Poetry. As a result, he attributes some of the more singular of Heaney's claims to the poet's awareness of an expectation, on the part of his audience, that he will make precisely such sweeping declarations for his art form from that Oxford lectern. There is no sense, in McDonald's analysis, of the convictions and formulations underlying Heaney's notion of redress, in particular his very well-developed theory of how poetry actually works; and thus McDonald's argument, however intriguing, is itself necessarily lacking in sufficient contextual background.⁹

Hazard Adams' *The Offense of Poetry* – to take one more example – offers the most focused, albeit somewhat abbreviated, discussion of Heaney's prose as it constitutes a defence of poetry that I have encountered. His study devotes a short chapter to Heaney's essays on the subject. Adams' concern is with the relationship of poetry to politics in the Irish writer's work, and by stringing together key quotations from Heaney's prose, he presents the reader with a summary of the poet's defence as it relates to the political. Much of Adams' discussion involves Heaney's use of Yeats and Kavanagh as exemplars, and his three-page analysis of *The Redress of Poetry* considers it, likewise, as part of Heaney's response to the political pressure that is often brought to bear on the art form itself.

⁷ Neil Corcoran, *The Poetry of Seamus Heaney: A Critical Study*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1998).

⁸ Peter McDonald, 'Seamus Heaney as Critic', in *Poetry in Contemporary Irish Literature*, ed. M. Keneally, (Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 1995), 174-189.

⁹ Peter McDonald, *Serious Poetry: Form and Authority from Yeats to Hill*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 83-94.

Essays on Heaney – which, collected, constitute the bulk of publications about his work – deal predominantly with one or more of the major themes in his poetry: politics,¹⁰ identity,¹¹ childhood,¹² land,¹³ and the pressure of Irish history on all of these. There are numerous essays on each of his collections of poetry, on individual poems, and occasional essays – rather than reviews, of which there are a multitude – on his prose collections.¹⁴ Corcoran is one of an exceptional few who consider Heaney’s entire body of prose, and Adams is similarly exceptional in his response to that prose as a defence per se; I have encountered very little other discussion of Heaney’s arguments for poetry, particularly as they develop across the decades of his career. Those texts which do concentrate to some degree on his prose, like Eugene O’Brien’s *Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing*, inevitably examine it as it relates to issues of politics, identity, Irishness, or any of the other dominant themes in Heaney’s poetry.¹⁵ Somewhat to my astonishment, I have discovered that in all the academic and critical writing about Heaney no one has focused sufficiently on his essayistic intervention into the status of poetry; there has been a marked lack of response to the extent and the complexity of his defence. Indeed, the very fact that his prose constitutes a coherent defence of poetry has not been adequately recognised. In his ‘Introduction’ to *The Cambridge Companion to Seamus Heaney*, published in December 2008, Bernard O’Donoghue goes so far as to diminish somewhat the importance of Heaney’s prose in relation to his achievements as poet and translator. In comparison to Yeats, O’Donoghue points out, Heaney ‘has been a busy career-teacher of literature as well as writer, rather than a “man of letters”’, and, unlike

¹⁰ See for example Jeffery Alan Triggs, ‘Hurt Into Poetry: The Political Verses of Seamus Heaney and Robert Bly’, in *The New Orleans Review* 19.3-4 (1992): 162-73; Eileen Cahill, ‘A Silent Voice: Seamus Heaney and Ulster Politics’, in *Critical Quarterly*, 29 (1987): 55-59; Rita Zoutenbier, ‘The Matter of Ireland and the Poetry of Seamus Heaney’, in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. H. Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 51-68.

¹¹ See for example David Lloyd, “‘Pap for the Dispossessed’: Seamus Heaney and the Poetics of Identity”, in *Seamus Heaney: Contemporary Critical Essays*, ed. M. Allen, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), 155-184.

¹² See for example Adrian Frazier, ‘Anger and Nostalgia: Seamus Heaney and the Ghost of the Father’, in *Eire-Ireland: Journal of Irish Studies* 36.3-4 (Fall-Winter 2001): 7-38.

¹³ See for example Dianne Meredith, ‘Landscape or Mindscape? Seamus Heaney’s Bogs’, in *Irish Geography* 32.2 (1999): 126-134; Brian Robinson, ‘Negotiations: Religion, Landscape, and the Postcolonial Moment in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney’, in *Mapping the Sacred: Religion, Geography and Postcolonial Literatures*, ed. J.S. Scott and P. Simpson-Housley, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2001), 5-38.

¹⁴ See for example Anne Stevenson, ‘The Peace within Understanding: Looking at *Preoccupations*’, in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. T. Curtis, (Mid Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press, 1982), 129-137.

¹⁵ Eugene O’Brien, *Seamus Heaney and the Place of Writing*, (Florida: University Press of Florida, 2002).

his compatriot predecessor's, Heaney's critical prose only gained 'substance' some way into his poetic career. For that reason, 'although Heaney's status as critic-practitioner is of undoubted significance', O'Donoghue chooses – like every editor before him – to place 'the emphasis in this book ... on him as poet, and to a lesser extent as poet-translator engaging with other poets'.¹⁶

III

In an essay on Eliot, 'The Poet as Critic', Graham Hough long ago observed that 'one of the tedious automatisms of literary history is the hostility, real or alleged, between poetry and criticism; and every age needs a poet-critic sufficiently powerful in both spheres to transcend such civil strife'.¹⁷ My argument in this thesis, contra O'Donoghue, is that Heaney is that poet-critic for our age, and that he has played a leading and vital role as 'man of letters' – that essential intermediary between the general reading public and a specialist audience – during the last thirty years. It is arguable that there are critics – Christopher Ricks springs immediately to mind – who are, *qua* critics, more intricate in their readings of individual poets (witness Ricks' work on Geoffrey Hill, for instance) and intellectually more sophisticated. Frank Kermode would be another singular instance. But neither of these brings to his work the authority of his own status as a poet. Nor is their ear so acutely attuned to the problematic status of poetry in the contemporary English-speaking world – and the manner in which it might best be 'forwarded' (one of Heaney's favourite verbs). With this in mind, I argue that Seamus Heaney's defence of poetry has significance far beyond that with which current critical work credits it.

Vendler reveals one reason for the importance of engaging with Heaney's prose work in its entirety – a reason which provides a further justification for this thesis – in her introductory comments to *Seamus Heaney*:

though fundamental aspects of [Heaney's] thought remain – the abiding anxiety over the social function of poetry, for instance, or the quarrel between aesthetic form and moral urgency – the metaphors in which he embodies such worries do alter from essay to essay, from poem to poem. It is for this reason that quoting a

¹⁶ O'Donoghue, *Cambridge Companion*, 2.

¹⁷ Graham Hough, 'The Poet as Critic', in *The Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot: New Essays*, ed. D. Newton-De Molina, (London: The Athlone Press, 1977), 42.

sentence or a stanza from Heaney and adducing that it gives ‘his opinion’ on this or that ... betrays the fluidity and responsiveness of his mind.¹⁸

My project in this thesis is to explore Heaney’s defence as it has developed, as its terms have changed, between Heaney’s earliest and most recent prose publications, thereby avoiding the limited, partial perspective of which Vendler warns above. I approach his essays specifically as they constitute a defence of poetry, and so my focus is exclusively on those individual essays which contribute to that defence – this is neither a general overview nor a comprehensive study of all the implications of Heaney’s critical writing. Neither is it merely exegesis. It is also an appreciation of Heaney’s prose, of his power to express – in the most vivid imagery and vigorous style – truths about our experience of poetry (and indeed of poetic ‘truth’ itself) which, articulated by him, are so gracefully rendered as to impress us, on an almost visceral level, with their intuitive rightness.

In the final chapter of this thesis I quote Eliot’s remark that his own criticism is ‘a by-product of [his] private poetry-workshop’, and suggest that this applies equally to Heaney; and here I should affirm that the same is true of my approach to Heaney’s writing.¹⁹ Taking my cue from the latter, both the manner and the matter of his prose style, I have not brought any specific critical theory to bear, though I have taken pains to elucidate and subject to scrutiny both the general tendency of his argument as well as its specifics. Distrust is not my method. As a poet myself, in a world increasingly, it has sometimes seemed, hostile to and scornful of that vocation, not least in my native South Africa,²⁰ I have found in Heaney’s defence an expression of and a justification for my faith in poetry’s usefulness, its necessity to our lives. My reading of his defence reflects that, and indeed celebrates it. Resentment and envy, Albert Camus once remarked, might be the hallmark of the relations between writers and their predecessors. But, as he went on to say, there can be another kind of relation as well: that of admiration.

¹⁸ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 10-11.

¹⁹ T.S. Eliot, ‘The Frontiers of Criticism’, in *On Poetry and Poets*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), 106.

²⁰ In South Africa, poetry currently enjoys a status so negligible that one of its recent, most eminent practitioners here, Douglas Livingstone, was not merely joking when he remarked that the white, English-speaking poet in South Africa was ‘the lowest form of life’. (Douglas Livingstone, ‘Douglas Livingstone: Poet Scientist’, interview by Michael Chapman, *Leadership SA* 4.3 (1985): 112.)

For it is indeed lucky to be able to experience, at least once in one's lifetime, this enthusiastic submission to another person. Among the half-truths that delight our intellectual society this stimulating thought can be found – that each conscience seeks the death of the other. At once we all become masters and slaves, dedicated to mutual annihilation. But the word master has another meaning, linked to the word disciple in respect and gratitude. It is no longer a question of one mind seeking to kill the other, but of a dialogue, which never ceases once it has begun, and which brings absolute satisfaction to certain lives.²¹

So it can be for critics, as well. Such, at any rate, is the conviction of this thesis-writer.

The history of English poetry is also a history of its defence. Hardly a significant poet in the last few centuries has failed to produce, whether by design or in passing, a piece of writing or verse which justifies the exercise of his or her art. This is my starting-point in Chapter 1, 'The Genealogy of a Defence', in which I give an overview of some of the most historically prominent of such apologies, sketching a line of descent from Sidney to Heaney. That line is, of necessity and also by the logic of this thesis, limited to those poets whose defences have had a recognisable effect on Heaney's own or reflect concerns which are echoed by him, deliberately or not. I refer, among others, to Heaney's Modernist forebears, T.S. Eliot, Ezra Pound, and Wallace Stevens, and those who follow in their footsteps, notably W.H. Auden and Randall Jarrell. In the latter part of the chapter, I turn my attention to two of Heaney's contemporaries whose defences are particularly noteworthy, and who have moved in the same orbit of widespread international recognition as Heaney: Joseph Brodsky and Czeslaw Milosz.²² My argument, both in the case of Heaney's predecessors and that of his peers, is that Heaney's defence is exceptional – not necessarily in its fundamental claims (all would be of one mind in their insistence on the centrality of the art form), but in the brio of its style and its synthesis of ideas.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are a detailed study of three strands of Heaney's defence. Here I look at the ideas that form and animate his argument, always bearing in mind that Heaney is himself never a theoretician; and in my explication of his claims, I highlight

²¹ Albert Camus and Jean Grenier, *Correspondence 1932-1960*, trans. J.F. Rigaud, (Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2003), 264.

²² Figures like these have come, in recent decades, despite their varying points of origin, to constitute something like a 'poetry international'. Derek Walcott belongs in this same company, but his critical writing does not include the kind of extended defence of poetry one finds in the others.

those elements which make the defence unique and uniquely important to our contemporary moment. Heaney's 'defence in theory' is contained in his four main collections of essays – *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures* and *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001* – and in a handful of his other essays, including his Nobel lecture. Chapter 2, 'The Processes of Poetry', focuses on the creative act itself as conceived of by Heaney in *Preoccupations* and *The Government of the Tongue*, and on the way in which the originating dynamics of the art form itself enable its efficacy, its forcibleness. Heaney's formulations in this regard constitute the substratum of his defence, of his claims for poetry, and in the following chapter, 'The Political Accusation', I explore those claims with respect to what has always been, for Heaney, poetry's greatest accuser; it is once more in the essays from his two earliest prose collections that we find this argument taking shape.

Heaney's central arguments are, despite Vendler's caveat in the extract already quoted, remarkably consistent across thirty-five years of writing and thinking. In many cases, they simply find a more eloquent and assured expression in his later work. *The Redress of Poetry*, however, represents the culmination of those ideas, its title essay providing the metaphor that is, ultimately, central to the defence as a whole. Thus my devotion of the entire fourth chapter of this thesis to that work and its title essay, in which Heaney's conception of poetry's potential as an art form extends beyond its capacity to respond to socio-political pressures, and becomes rather a claim for poetry's sufficiency as a counterbalance to the world and the weight of reality itself.

Given Heaney's own unfailing provision of both exempla and exemplars in his critical writing, it is instructive to demonstrate the relevance of his defence to his own practice as a poet. Chapter 5, 'The Defence in Practice', presents five of Heaney's poems and demonstrates the ways in which, in one or another respect, they too exemplify what he maintains in his critical essays. These poems, while each recognizably Heanyesque, are in a range of styles, on a variety of themes, and they date from the very beginning of Heaney's career to his more recent work. While not chosen at random, they nevertheless reveal the consonance between the literary critic and the practitioner – precisely that consonance which has added so much persuasive force to what we could call Heaney's

own witness to the importance of poetry. My analysis of them, even as it uses all of the touchstones to be found in Heaney's defence, should not, however, be read as an attempt to apply his literary-critical precepts to his verse in a mechanical fashion; that is neither the purpose of the defence nor that of the poems. Rather, my aim is to show how Heaney's central ideas of what poetry is and does are fulfilled in his own poetry, and how awareness of those ideas can deepen any reading of his verse.

IV

A rowan like a lipsticked girl.
Between the by-road and the main road
alder trees at a wet and dripping distance
stand off among the rushes.

There are the mud-flowers of dialect
and the immortelles of perfect pitch
and that moment when the bird sings very close
to the music of what happens.²³

I have spoken already – and I will speak again – of Heaney's ability, amounting at times to a kind of genius in itself, to give linguistic shape to the most apparently obscure, intuitive promptings, to give definitive expression to that which would otherwise seem to defy articulation. He does this in both his poetry and prose, and in the latter he does so most often when he writes of poetry's purpose in the world. The conviction that every poet must feel – the inner certainty that poetry is a worthwhile and indeed justifiable activity – is given the force of an argument, illuminated by any number of superbly chosen images, in Heaney's work. In his essays, I have found the satisfaction that I find otherwise only in the poems that move me most: that moment of recognition, the always surprising, always gratifying discovery that the art form has that within it which is inexhaustible in its capacity to mean. For that reason above all, I have chosen to write this particular thesis – for reasons which amount to a faith of the kind that Heaney has held throughout his career. In the matter of poetry and its place, Heaney's account is very close to – indeed, it is hardly a note away from – the music of what happens.

²³ Seamus Heaney, 'Song', in *New Selected Poems 1966-1987*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1990), 127.

Chapter 1

The Genealogy of a Defence

[When poets] turn to the great masters of the past, they turn to an image of their own creation, one which is likely to be a reflection of their own imaginative needs, their own artistic inclinations and procedures.

Seamus Heaney, 'Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet'¹

I

The defence of poetry in the history of English literature dates back, most famously, to Sir Philip Sidney's essay 'An Apology for Poetry' (1595), written on the brink of a century that would see the emergence of, among others, Donne, Herbert, Milton and (perhaps most astonishingly of all) Shakespeare. Attempts to justify the art form continued – in largely unsystematic form – over the centuries. But it is with the advent of the nineteenth century, and specifically of Shelley and his 'Defence of Poetry' (1821), that we are introduced to a whole tendency in the writing about poetry. As we approach the present, the number of 'defences' would seem to grow exponentially as, more and more, the art form of poetry itself is seen to be in eclipse. Seamus Heaney's defence is, of course, part of the general genealogical line of apologies that begins with Sidney's. It is instructive, however, given the purpose of this thesis, to identify more specifically Heaney's direct and indirect influences, as well as writers whose defences of poetry form useful points of comparison and contrast. I use the term 'genealogy' in this chapter loosely, therefore, to encompass the range of different relationships existing between Heaney's arguments and those of his predecessors and contemporaries.

On the face of it, given the literary-historical context in which both Sidney and Shelley made their arguments for poetry, it is difficult to imagine what their motivation for doing so might have been – or would be were it not for a paragraph in Sidney's defence in which he laments that poetry 'from almost the highest estimation of learning is fallen to be the laughing-stock of children'.² His purpose, as soon becomes clear, is to defend poetry from the attack by 'reason'. Shelley, too, is concerned with defending

¹ Seamus Heaney, 'Envies and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', *Irish University Review* 15/1 (1985): 5.

² Sir Philip Sidney, 'An Apology for Poetry Otherwise Known as The Defence of Poesy', in *Sidney – An Apology for Poetry, Shelley – A Defence of Poetry*, ed. H.A. Needham, (London: Ginn and Company, 1963), 2.

poetry against the ‘challenge’ of ‘reasoners and mechanists’, whose view that ‘reason is more useful’ threatens to relegate poetry to the realm of frivolity.³ In short, the art form would seem to have had as its chief denigrator science and the scientific method, and, more broadly, the materialist interpretation (and critique) of the world ever more dominant since the seventeenth century – what Blake contemptuously referred to as ‘the Baconian succession’.

Four hundred years later, this state of affairs is often said – by any number of critics, cultural commentators and poets themselves – to have reached a point of crisis. More than ever (and certainly more than Sidney could have imagined) poetry in the English-speaking world has been reduced to a ‘laughing-stock’, and perhaps worse; in the eyes of many, particularly those educated readers who might once have given the art form some attention, it holds no interest at all. Rather, it has been relegated to the uneasy status of a specialist interest, its audience largely confined to students (that is, the classroom) and its practitioners to the ‘closed circuit’ of the poetry reading circuit, whether in the United States, the United Kingdom or elsewhere. Those in the world outside this clique, if they pay it any heed at all, know that poetry is dead. Nor do they seem to consider this reason for lamentation. It is, quite simply, an art form – and not the first, historically speaking – that has been superseded by others.

The claims made in the previous paragraph might seem too general and generalising. There are, after all, those who would maintain that poetry now reaches a wider audience than ever before and that the anxiety, not to say anguish, that underlies so many defences of the art form is unnecessarily defensive, even uncalled for. The Mexican poet Octavio Paz, for example, writing in the last part of the twentieth century about the American poetry scene, claims as much in *The Other Voice*.⁴ Nevertheless, there is by now a body of critical literature that affirms what Christopher Clausen, at the outset of his *The Place of Poetry* puts bluntly: the status of the art form ‘in English and American civilisation has become more and more peripheral’. This is a problem, he continues, that has already been in existence for two centuries or so; it has ‘faced every poet since

³ Percy Bysshe Shelley, ‘A Defence of Poetry’, in *Sidney – An Apology for Poetry, Shelley – A Defence of Poetry*, ed. H.A. Needham, (London: Ginn and Company, 1931), 97.

⁴ Octavio Paz, ‘The Few and the Many’, in *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry*, trans. H. Lane, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 84.

Wordsworth, and ... has never been resolved'.⁵ In his conception, all the poetic innovations of recent centuries, most obviously conspicuous in the Romantic revolution and thereafter the Modernist revolution, have, despite their innovative brilliance, come to nought. However much these innovations might have been appreciated, establishing a new audience for poetry (at least for a while), there persists a widespread consensus among critics and writers, particularly when it comes to the latter half of the twentieth century and beyond, that poetry is dying or is otherwise moribund. There have been recent critical studies whose very titles are based on the assumption that this death has already taken place – Vernon Shetley's *After the Death of Poetry*, obviously borrowing its title from the anti-theology of the 1960s which took it as read that God was dead, is only one such book.⁶

The American essayist Joseph Epstein's famous 1988 article 'Who killed poetry?', published in *Commentary*, is based on the same premise, and Epstein attempts to explain why and how with a pointed and critical assessment of poetry's place in America during the decades previous to the 1980s. 'Contemporary poetry in the United States flourishes in a vacuum' is the statement which best encapsulates the crux of his argument. While creative writing programmes grow ever fuller, while poets are employed to teach such programmes, and while poetry readings happen almost nightly on campuses around America, poetry has lost its place in the world outside of this particular ghetto – which is to say, in the hearts and minds and, not least, the memories of the general American reader – and is dying, or is dead, as a result of this.⁷ It is, after all, that general reader who ensures the existence of the art form as a vital one.

As evident in the Letters page of *Commentary*, there was a blizzard of attempted rebuttals to Epstein's central thesis. Its durability, not to say soundness, however, were demonstrated when, in 1991, the American poet and critic Dana Gioia published an essay, entitled 'Can Poetry Matter?', which would become one of a series by that writer on the status of poetry in the United States. In this pivotal essay, Gioia echoes many of the observations of Randall Jarrell, who, in the middle part of the twentieth century, was

⁵ Christopher Clausen, *The Place of Poetry: Two Centuries of an Art in Crisis*, (Kentucky: University of Kentucky Press, 1981), 1.

⁶ Vernon Shetley, *After the Death of Poetry: Poet and Audience in Contemporary America*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

⁷ Joseph Epstein, 'Who Killed Poetry?', *Commentary* 86.2 (1988): 14.

among the first and most prominent critics to notice and lament the poet's 'social irrelevance', exploring issues like the 'professionalisation of the poet' and poetry's increasing obscurity. Gioia's conclusions are, like Epstein's too, deeply pessimistic.⁸ Poetry has vanished from the public eye to exist as a subculture, one characterised by an absence of sound criticism and dominated by the tacit understanding that poetry is no longer published to be read, but exists primarily as a means to achieving tenure in the academy. Cut off from the cultural role it once fulfilled, poetry cannot regain its status, Gioia argues, until poets redirect their attention to the primary concerns and needs of human beings. As things stand at the time of his writing, however, poetry has become the coterie concern of a group distinguished by its isolation. Hence, again, its sickness. Gioia concludes his essay by offering, without Swiftian irony, 'six modest proposals' for the reinstatement of poetry as a popular and relevant art form. These include honest criticism (he cites Jarrell as an example of such writing), an increased number of poetry performances (more public readings in conjunction with other art forms), and the inclusion of the poetry of other writers in any reading by an individual poet. The modesty of these suggestions, however, is such that they scarcely bear up against the weight of Gioia's gloom in the preceding ten pages of the essay. Though his final image is of poetry as an 'ancient, spangle-feathered, unkillable phoenix rising from the ashes', the reader is neither persuaded nor particularly inspired.⁹ All the evidence simply adds weight to Epstein's contention that poetry has died.

The picture, though with certain culturally specific modifications, has hardly been different in the United Kingdom or the rest of the English-speaking world, whether Australia or South Africa. In the 1950s, presenting a series of lectures at Harvard University, the Scottish writer Edwin Muir was referring to the selfsame predicament of poets back home when he spoke of their horrified realisation that their former audience had literally evaporated.¹⁰ And many of Philip Larkin's statements on poetry, including some of his most famous, are best read as his recognition of the ill-health, not to say

⁸ Brad Leithauser, 'Introduction', in *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), xii. By 'obscurity', Jarrell did not mean 'difficulty', but rather the degree to which poetry had become obscured from the view of the general public.

⁹ Dana Gioia, 'Can Poetry Matter?', *The Atlantic Monthly* 267.5 (1991): 105-106.

¹⁰ Edwin Muir, 'Poetry and the Poet', in *The Estate of Poetry: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1962), 78-93.

terminal decline, of an art form which has lost its former pleasure-seeking, and hence cash-paying, audience.¹¹ In short, the plight of poetry is trans-Atlantic.

II

Given poetry's effective disappearance from public recognition and response, the culmination, if you like, of what Clausen calls its ongoing crisis, it is no wonder that a defence of poetry should now be the accepted companion to the poetic work of many writers. It is even, as Adam Zagajewski points out in 'Against Poetry', expected.¹² Any number of instances are to hand: Adrienne Rich's 'Legislators of the World', Donald Hall's *Death to the Death of Poetry*, and Jorie Graham's 'Introduction' to *The Best American Poetry 1990*, among a multitude of others.¹³ Yet none of these, despite the intentions and talents of their proponents, has constituted anything like a definitive rejoinder to all that is now ranged against poetry and its worth. In any case, the neglect of the art form has continued unabated.

In previous history, at least up to the nineteenth century, it is science and the scientific method that have, in general, presented the greatest threat to poetry; this is the first of the foes against which poetry has had to contend historically. As Clausen implies, early defences have often enough been based on the premise that, contrary to the assumptions of science, the poetic imagination gives us truths which are as valid as anything science can offer.¹⁴ But the way of apprehending the world, indeed understanding it, which science makes possible, is the only form of knowing which now has credence – such has been the conviction of poetry's derogators. The truths of the imagination, however attractive, are not the truths of science: they belong to a mind, an epoch, characterised by a kind of intellectual infancy.

¹¹ See Philip Larkin, 'The Pleasure Principle', in *Required Writing: Miscellaneous Pieces 1955-1982*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982). Similar sentiments are expressed elsewhere in his writing.

¹² Adam Zagajewski, 'Against Poetry', in *A Defense of Ardor: Essays*, trans. C. Cavanagh, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 127.

¹³ Adrienne Rich, 'Legislators of the World', *The Guardian*, November 18, 2006; Donald Hall, *Death to the Death of Poetry: Essays, Reviews, Notes, Interviews*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Jorie Graham, 'Introduction', in *The Best American Poetry 1990*, (New York: Collier Books, 1990), xv-xxxi.

¹⁴ Clausen, 1.

It is no doubt this particular denigration of his chosen art that Sir Philip Sidney has in mind when, in the opening paragraphs of his ‘Apology for Poetry’ (or ‘The Defence of Poesy’, to give it its full title), he chastises poetry’s opponents for failing to acknowledge that poetry – not science – has been ‘the first light-giver to ignorance’, the original form of all knowledge and teaching.¹⁵ This is one strand of what is, broadly speaking, a double-stranded defence. Written in response to the Puritan accusation, levelled by Stephen Gosson, of the immoral influence of poets, Sidney’s argument is that, firstly, poetry in fact encourages the inclination towards moral goodness in its readers; and secondly, that poetry is a superior form of knowledge and pedagogy.¹⁶ Starting with poetry’s broad cultural effects – as Gosson does in his essay on ‘The Schoole of Abuse’ constituted by ‘Poets, Pipers, Plaiers, Iesters and suchlike Caterpillars of the Commonwealth’¹⁷ – Sidney pays particular attention to the response of the individual character to poetry, showing how the art form is both socially and individually beneficial.¹⁸

For our purposes, however, Sidney’s defence is historically interesting for two reasons. Most importantly, it establishes poetry’s first major foe: science. Listing the objections to poetry which he is attempting to refute – ‘the most important imputations laid to the poor poets’ in the sixteenth century – Sidney’s attention is given first to the claim there are ‘more fruitful knowledges’ by comparison with which poetry appears a waste of time.¹⁹ His whole defence turns on the assertion that poetry’s purpose is ‘to teach’ – as do the sciences – ‘and delight’ – an ability which, combined with poetry’s educative properties, enables it in Sidney’s view to surpass the natural sciences in its advantages to humankind.²⁰ As a teacher of history, philosophy, morality and culture it is, he argues, unparalleled. Furthermore, poetry is deserving of all praise, according to Sidney, because it is ‘full of virtue-breeding delightfulness, and void of no gift that ought

¹⁵ Sidney, 2.

¹⁶ H.A. Needham, ‘Introduction’, in *Sidney – An Apology for Poetry, Shelley – A Defence of Poetry*, ed. H.A. Needham, (London: Ginn and Company, 1931), xxii.

¹⁷ Needham, xxii.

¹⁸ Jeannine Johnson, *Why Write Poetry? Modern Poets Defending Their Art*, (New Jersey: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007), 29.

¹⁹ Sidney, 37.

²⁰ Sidney, 10.

to be in the noble name of learning'.²¹ It not only teaches truth in all its forms, but it also imparts righteousness to its readers, and it does so, crucially, through its ability to delight the reader.

The connection between pleasure and instruction in Sidney's defence is, as one critic has pointed out, 'one of its major strategies for defending poetry', and it establishes Heaney's critical heredity from Sidney – poetry's pleasure-giving properties are affirmed throughout the Irish writer's defence, although, as we will see, his understanding of their effects differs markedly from Sidney's.²² Delight, for the Elizabethan, is the 'royal road' (to use Freud's term) to one's betterment, morally speaking, as a human being, and his emphasis on delight and pleasure is distinctly utilitarian. In the opening section of his defence, Sidney recites the different cultures and languages in which poetry has served, through its form and subject, as a vehicle for learning: the Greeks 'sang their natural philosophy in verses', as well as their 'moral counsels'; the Romans wrote their histories in poetry; it was Italian poets who first 'made [the language] aspire to be a treasure-house of science'. And even in Heaney's homeland, Ireland, 'where truly learning goeth very bare', poets are revered for their learning and ability to teach.²³

The fundamental distinction Sidney claims for the poet is that, unlike practitioners of the sciences – astronomers, mathematicians, philosophers, linguists, doctors, even musicians – he or she is not constrained by the limitations of the natural world, by its laws: 'he goeth hand in hand with Nature, not enclosed within the narrow warrant of her gifts'.²⁴ The poet creates anew, while the scientist describes the existent creation, and operates within it like a mouse within the confines of a maze: the scientist's is the most determined of existences. In Sidney's assertion of such things, we find, in germinal form, something of the relationship between poetry and reality that Wallace Stevens, over three hundred years later, will emphasise and on which Heaney will elaborate: the poet creates a 'better' version of nature, as Sidney puts it, a different reality, but one that is nonetheless linked to the actual. For Sidney, however, that relationship is significant because it gives poetry its pedagogical power – never a concern for either Stevens or

²¹ Sidney, 61.

²² Mary Ellen Lamb, 'Apologizing for Pleasure in Sidney's "Apology for Poetry": The Nurse of Abuse Meets the Tudor Grammar School', in *Criticism* 36.4 (1994): 499.

²³ Sidney, 3-5.

²⁴ Sidney, 7-8.

Heaney, for whom, as we shall see, poetry is faced with a rather different kind of enemy. ‘Learning’, in Sidney’s definition, has as its ultimate purpose ‘the perfection ... of our degenerate souls’, and while none of the sciences alone can accomplish anything close to that perfection, poetry in all its forms (as he goes on to show through comparison with its scientific ‘competitors’) deserves ‘the laurel crown’ for the holistic betterment it enables through its conjunction of teaching and giving pleasure.²⁵ Aesthetics leads directly to ethics, or, in Sidney’s terms, morality. Thus Sidney is able to maintain that, in the realm of human learning, ‘is our poet the monarch’.²⁶

The other accusations against which Sidney defends poetry are telling, too, of the time in which he wrote, though they would later not assume nearly so much prominence. Given the effective equation seen to exist between art and morality, it is a particularly damaging charge against poetry that it is, according to its late sixteenth-century detractors, ‘the mother of lies’, and ‘the nurse of abuse’, suspect because of the immorality or amorality that it promotes. Both of these charges presuppose that poetry makes things happen, enacts change – immoral, corruptive change, indeed, but change nonetheless. Its lies are damaging only because we are seduced by them into false belief. The ‘abuse’ it engenders is the transformation of moral men and women into hedonists and sinners.²⁷ These accusations, of course, have a long history. They originate with Plato, who, ironically, in his *The Republic*, credited poetry with a greater degree of efficacy than poets themselves, by and large, would claim for it in the twentieth century. By that time, poetry would be fighting to be recognised as efficacious in any sense.

The pedagogical, truth-telling function of poetry had, by the nineteenth century, become far more significant than Sidney could have foreseen. In the eyes of many, the continued expansion of science and industry had come to threaten the spiritual health of the Western world – the very existence of spiritual humankind as such. In the two hundred years between Sidney’s ‘Apology for Poetry’ and Percy Bysshe Shelley’s ‘Defence of Poetry’, religion was to lose much of its influence, its social agency, and, in its place, poetry came to be viewed as a source of revelation, as the origin of religious belief and experience, at least in the Romantic conception. Shelley’s essay was a reply to

²⁵ Sidney, 13, 14, 34.

²⁶ Sidney, 25.

²⁷ Sidney, 37-40.

Thomas Love Peacock's 'The Four Ages of Poetry', an attack on the Romantic poets which accused them of 'wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance' while science and politics elevated and edified society as a whole.²⁸ For this reason, perhaps, Shelley is more preoccupied than Sidney with refuting the notion that poetry is mere intellectual frivolity in comparison with more exalted, scientific forms of knowledge.²⁹ In the Romantic era, science, and the kind of mind moulded by science, was still the greatest foe – greater, in fact, than it was for Sidney, and not surprisingly given the massive scientific advancement, and its technological application, that had taken place in the intervening centuries. Shelley, however, invokes a new, altogether different kind of weapon against the enemy: the imagination, that notion so central to most Romantic ideology, is set in opposition to reason. The concept of the imagination will recur in Heaney, making him an essentially neo-Romantic writer and poet, and it is useful to be more specific, at this point, about what this aspect of the mind amounts to in the Romantic conception.³⁰

The Romantic poets – including Wordsworth, Coleridge, Keats, Blake and, of course, Shelley – conceived of poetry as an art form primarily in its relation to the imaginative faculty. In the history of Romanticism, as Stephen Prickett points out, there were two ways of viewing that faculty: firstly, as a means to perceive a transcendent order, as a point of access to the spiritual realm, so to speak; and secondly, as a lens through which we might view the world around us more clearly and minutely.³¹ Integral to both of these aspects is the imagination's status as a creative force, which, as Shelley declares, 'creates anew the universe'.³² In his defence, these two views are intertwined – poetry, the embodiment of the imagination, both 'lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world, and makes familiar objects be as if they were not familiar' and also 'redeems

²⁸ Needham, xxx-xxxi.

²⁹ Johnson, 32.

³⁰ The term 'neo-Romantic' is, of course, used by critics to refer to a number of different movements in the art, music and literature of various countries at various times. I use it here, and throughout this thesis, to denote the twentieth-century movement in visual art and writing which, as Saunders puts it, 'brought with it a new emphasis on ideas of Englishness [or, in Heaney's case, Irishness] as rooted in the past, in place, and in myth'. The term more generally, too, in the case of Heaney, implies a commitment to the fundamental tenets of Romanticism: the importance of humankind's relationship with the natural world, the pre-eminence of the imagination to the intellect, and the use of the subjective lyric form. (Corinne J. Saunders, *A Companion to Romance: From Classical to Contemporary*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), 8.)

³¹ Stephen Prickett, *The Romantics*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 1981), 173.

³² Stephen Bygrave, *Romantic Writings: Approaching Literature*, (London: Routledge, 1996), 326; Shelley, 105.

from decay the visitations of the divinity in man'.³³ The power of the imagination as creator, as source of both sacred and secular revelation, aligns it in the Romantic view – and most certainly in Shelley's view – with a kind of surrogate divinity.

It is perhaps to be expected, therefore, that Shelley should in his defence assign any number of roles to the poet, that human vessel of the imagination. These include, as Jeannine Johnson points out in *Why Write Poetry?*, 'the duties of prosecutor and defendant, as well as the responsibilities of ... judge, jury, political reformer, spiritual redeemer, prophet, lover, and, most famously, legislator'.³⁴ At the heart of each of these, indeed at the heart of poetry's worth, is the imagination. Like Sidney, Shelley understands the function of poetry – of the imagination – as being to 'colour' reality 'with its own light', to take the actual and enhance it, combine its parts, create it afresh. Reason, for Shelley, describes (as science did for Sidney) that which is already known; the imagination, on the other hand, reveals the relationships between elements, and their value both individually and corporately. The relative importance of reason and the imagination is evident in Shelley's statement that 'reason is to the imagination as the instrument to the agent, as the body to the spirit, as the shadow to the substance'.³⁵ The world in the absence of imagination is, according to the Romantic poet, a hampered, tenuous place – not worth living in.

It is the threat of this very state of affairs to which Shelley responds in his defence. Science, he declares, has outdistanced the imagination, and resulted in a spiritually and emotionally impoverished society: 'the cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world'. It is acknowledged that 'the exercise of the imagination is most delightful', but it is claimed that the exercise of reason is 'more useful'; thus the human creature is now enslaved to reason. Furthermore, the predominance of science and industry has failed to alter society usefully. Shelley warns the 'mechanist' and the 'political economist' of the consequences

³³ Shelley, 78, 104.

³⁴ Johnson, 32.

³⁵ Shelley, 67.

of their failure to retain contact with ‘those first principles which belong to the imagination’: ‘the rich ... become richer, and the poor ... become poorer’.³⁶

Early in his defence, Shelley attempts to establish the credibility of poetry by arguing that ‘language itself is poetry’. According to this formulation, poetry is constitutional to humankind, by virtue of its exact relation to that which is most instinctual in us – namely, our linguistic faculty. Language, in turn, is the product of the imagination. Without the imagination, and without its manifestation in poetry, Shelley claims – in an assertion echoed by T.S. Eliot a century later – society’s speech ‘will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse’.³⁷ The primary role of the poet, however, is not, for Shelley, guardian of the language. Poets in fact, in his conception, are seers, priests in everything but name. They ‘apprehend the true and the beautiful’, and in so doing they become ‘prophets’, seeing and understanding – indeed creating – both the present order and that within it which foreshadows a future one. They ‘draw into a certain propinquity with ... that partial apprehension of the agencies of the invisible world which is called religion’.³⁸ Consequently, poetry nourishes and sustains humankind’s spiritual faculty. It is, for Shelley, religion by other means; and the imagination is God by other means, or the Holy Spirit moving, with its creative force, upon the waters of the intellect. Poetry itself is spoken of in terms which directly mirror the language of the Bible. In Shelley’s view, therefore, the art form is nothing short of ‘eternal truth’; the poet ‘participates in the eternal, the infinite and the one’.³⁹

Poetry’s capacity as truth-teller, as source of revelation – indeed, its capacity to effect anything at all – is bound up, for Shelley as it was for Sidney, with its ability to give pleasure. Shelley defines ‘utility’, both with reference to reason and to the imagination, as the means to produce the kind of pleasure that ‘strengthens and purifies the affections, enlarges the imagination, and adds spirit to sense’. In these terms, poetry is ultimately and essentially useful, in contrast to science and reason, which provide instead the lesser pleasure of a factual grasp of the world and the security of that knowledge.⁴⁰ Not even scientific enlightenment, however, is out of reach of the imagination, for poetry

³⁶ Shelley, 97-100.

³⁷ Shelley, 72, 70.

³⁸ Shelley, 70-71.

³⁹ Shelley, 79, 75.

⁴⁰ Shelley, 97.

is also 'the centre and circumference of knowledge; it is that which comprehends all science, and that to which all science must be referred. It is at the same time the root and the blossom of all other systems of thought'.⁴¹ In short, poetry is superior to science in the most fundamental sense – the sense in which a parent, being older, being the originator, is superior to the child whom he or she has parented.

Shelley concludes his defence with what T.S. Eliot, writing a hundred years later, calls 'the highest point of exaggeration' in the claims made for poetry in that period.⁴² And indeed the boldness of Shelley's contentions, the element of exaggeration that Eliot identifies in them, is perhaps the surest sign of Shelley's sense of the magnitude of the threat that poetry faces. His defence, for all its brilliance, is also a rhetorical pre-emptive strike, it seems, against his dismayed sense of an art form's inability to sustain itself in the face of the forces, historical and otherwise, ranged against it. This is nowhere more evident than in the flourish with which his defence of poetry ends. 'Poets', Shelley notoriously claims, 'are the unacknowledged legislators of the world' – a phrase more accurately describing, as Auden would later (facetiously) suggest, 'the secret police'.⁴³ Even if they are unrecognised, poets invisibly lay down through their work the very terms, indeed the laws, according to which the world and human cognition itself operate.⁴⁴ Heaney will also make very large claims for the art form, though he, perhaps strategically, will never formulate his arguments for the centrality of poetry in such verbally extravagant fashion. Judging by Shelley's rhetoric, one sometimes gets the impression that the troubled space in which religion now finds itself is the consequence of a kind of fortunate fall, in that it has given, according to the Romantic poet, pre-eminence to the imagination. Heaney, on the other hand, would appear to be at peace with religion, content to allow it whatever place it currently has in the world, and he does not try to erect poetry as an idol – indeed, as I will argue, he never sees poetry as a substitute for anything else. Nevertheless, he is in many respects in direct lineal descent from Shelley and the whole Romantic inheritance.

⁴¹ Shelley, 101.

⁴² T.S. Eliot, 'Introduction', in *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism: Studies in the Relation of Criticism to Poetry in England*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1964), 25.

⁴³ W.H. Auden, 'Writing', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 27.

⁴⁴ Shelley, 109.

Science, however, figures almost nowhere in Heaney's work as a prominent threat to poetry. In fact, he gives all the appearance of someone quite comfortable with both the scientific method and the effects of applied science, even when a note of ecological concern appears, as well it might, in his later poetry.⁴⁵ Almost all the great English poets from the Romantics to the Modernists, not excepting Eliot and Auden, may, as Clausen points out, have been antagonistic towards science, both in its social and intellectual effects. But with the turn of the twentieth century it becomes more and more apparent that there are a number of other foes with which poetry has to contend, and which, no less than science, are concerned to call into question its very *raison d'être*.

Some, even until recently, do continue to see science as a threat that has by no means diminished – in the mind of Czeslaw Milosz, a poet in whom the Romantic legacy (in its Polish articulation) is also a living one, what he calls 'the lesson of biology' has dealt the imagination an all but mortal wound.⁴⁶ Such defenders are, however, rarities by now. And perhaps this reflects, broadly, the fact that the predominance of science is such that it has become pointless to argue with it; our lives are so governed by the applied sciences that to attack it as a social force would be at best futile, and at worst ludicrous. In any case, the scientific enemy has changed shape, over the last century in particular, and is now embodied, for some, like Heidegger, in technology, and the technology-based forms of popular culture increasingly available in contemporary societies. In his 'The Question Concerning Technology', as Dreyfus and Wrathall indicate, Heidegger considers whether poetry is strong enough to resist 'the dangers of technology' – the threat it poses to the clarity and meaning with which we see the world through poetic utterance.⁴⁷ It is, moreover, the very success of science in its technological application that gives rise to the accusation presented by environmental concerns, prompting defences based in ecocriticism, a genre which 'seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crises'.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ See, for example, 'In Iowa' and 'Höfn' in *District and Circle* (Faber & Faber, 2006).

⁴⁶ Czeslaw Milosz, 'The Lesson of Biology', in *The Witness of Poetry: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1984), 43. In the above essay, he writes 'As to poetry, it must shift for itself as best it can in the new conditions where imagination is losing its foundation, that is, its vision of the central place of man, and of any given individual, in space and time.'

⁴⁷ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Mark A. Wrathall, *Heidegger Re-examined: Art, Poetry and Technology*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), xi.

⁴⁸ Richard Kerridge, *Writing the Environment: Ecocriticism and Literature*, (London: Zed Books, 1998), 5.

The early Modernists, on the other hand, were alert to an entirely different set of enemies. In the eyes of writers like Ezra Pound, for instance, the principle obstacle to the continued flourishing of poetry was the advent of mass society, and the ‘dumbing down’ that he, as one among a self-appointed elite, saw this as effecting. Writing in 1951, he claims that poetry cannot possibly survive in a world dominated by a dull-witted mob.⁴⁹ The Modernist revolution led by Pound brought about, ironically, a threat of a different order in the changed nature of poetry itself. The art form in this instance is not under attack by any external enemy, but is instead compromised by its own self-mutilation, its wilful obscurity and the very elitism exemplified by Pound’s grievance above. The difficulty, not to say impenetrability, of much Modernist poetry makes it its own worst enemy, severing that line of connection it once had with its audience. This is, of course, the complaint of those like Laura Riding and Robert Graves, in their *Survey of Modernist Poetry*, and Philip Larkin.⁵⁰

These threats and the responses they provoke have, to be sure, little direct bearing on Heaney’s defence or the enemy to which Heaney himself responds, although it is widely acknowledged that the current isolation of the art form owes something, at least, to the inaccessibility of its modernist and indeed postmodernist forms. Pound’s argument brings to light, however, the kinds of challenges that poetry was perceived to be facing in the first half of the last century, those opponents which, importantly, signalled the decline in significance of the scientific challenge and paved the way for the socio-political pressures that would come to be exerted on the art form.

For none of these adversaries (and I have by no means exhausted the possible candidates) has assumed the dominance of the accusation levelled against poetry by those whose first and last priority is the improvement or revolutionary restructuring of society: to wit, politics. In a sense, this merely reflects a broad tendency in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century history in the northern hemisphere. The unceasing transformation, of the most radical sort, that Marx saw as being definitive of nineteenth-century capitalism, was only another element in creating a broad social consensus that societies were designed to evolve; and always in the direction of an improved version of themselves.

⁴⁹ Ezra Pound, *The ABC of Reading*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1951), 81.

⁵⁰ Clausen, 95.

Politics, understood as change, thus came to dominate the minds of men and women in a way which was unprecedented. And likewise the expectation – often the demand – that the only thing (whether object or action) that had value was that which contributed to social betterment. This increase in the influence of politics and the political is reflected in the quotation from Thomas Mann that Yeats, somewhat scornfully, uses to preface his poem ‘Politics’: ‘In our time the destiny of man presents its meanings in political terms’.⁵¹ Aided and abetted by an unrelenting series of social and political upheavals in the twentieth century, as well as its mass movements and revolutions, politics has come to take the place of science as the deity to which every aspect of society and culture must answer as to its relevance.

Thus, with the advent of the twentieth century, poetry is culpable because it is useless – so the accusation goes. Socially, politically, it is without efficacy. It makes nothing happen or, if it makes something happen, it is the wrong thing. In short, if many twentieth-century practitioners have felt it necessary to defend poetry, it is, recalling Shelley and Sidney, because the art form is worthless; but the reason for that worthlessness has changed. It is politics, not science, which now says that poetry is without point and purpose.

All of this is writ large in the case of Heaney and his career. It would be impossible to overemphasise the importance of Northern Ireland and its calamitous history in his development, had not numerous critics paid it detailed attention already and tracked the particular events impacting on that development.⁵² While there is no need to cover ground already traversed by so many critics, the Troubles of that country – its political turmoil – have been crucial in imbuing him with a sense that the relationship between poetry and politics, between aesthetics and ethics, is deeply conflictual. And it is the ideologues in that struggle, those all too ready to accuse him and his art form of gross irresponsibility towards a society in travail, who have been the figures with which Heaney has, above all, battled. Poetry, as he will argue, is efficacious, contrary to what those primarily governed by political imperatives might say; only it is efficacious in a

⁵¹ William Butler Yeats, ‘Politics’, in *The Collected Poems of W.B. Yeats*, (Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Editions, 2000), 348.

⁵² See for example Michael Parker, *Seamus Heaney: The Making of the Poet*, (London: MacMillan, 1993); Peter McDonald, *Mistaken Identities: Poetry and Northern Ireland*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

way which is infinitely more subtle than is generally appreciated or accepted. It might make nothing happen, as Auden claimed. But it is also, as Auden went on to say (and the second half of that sentence in his elegy for Yeats is often ignored), ‘a way of happening, a mouth’.

III

That World War II should have prompted the chief Modernist protagonists to become ever more aware of the political accusation against poetry – that it should have given that accusation greater weight – is not surprising. In a 1942 letter to E. Martin Browne, T.S. Eliot, as he worked on ‘Little Gidding’, wrote the following:

in the midst of what is going on now, it is hard, when you sit down at a desk, to feel confident that morning after morning spent fiddling with words and rhythms is justified activity – especially as there is never any certainty that the whole thing won’t have to be scrapped. And on the other hand, external or public activity is more of a drug than is this solitary toil which often seems so pointless.⁵³

Concerned though he may have been at this stage about the validity of his vocation, Eliot did not in fact see politics as the Goliath which it had already been for some poets in the 1930s in the United Kingdom (Auden, Spender and MacNeice, for example), and which it would be for many others thereafter throughout Europe. His defence, nonetheless, implicitly answers one aspect of the political challenge, in that its argument for poetry is fundamentally utilitarian. For Eliot, as for Sidney and Shelley, poetry is useful to society; Eliot, however, unlike his predecessors, gives a new emphasis to that assertion.

The view that poetry acts as a cleansing agent on the common language had long been held by Eliot’s contemporary, Ezra Pound, who asserted in ‘Writers and Writing’ that ‘good writers are those who keep the language efficient ... keep it accurate, keep it clear’.⁵⁴ George Orwell, another of Eliot’s contemporaries, was to write in ‘Politics and the English Language’ of the deliberate opacity, the mendacity, of twentieth-century politics and its discourse, its propensity for leaching the language of meaning, or muddying its semantic waters in order to conceal the ugly truth of political matters as

⁵³ Qtd in Seamus Heaney, ‘The Government of the Tongue’, in *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 107.

⁵⁴ Pound, *The ABC of Reading*, 32.

they stood in that century.⁵⁵ While Orwell himself was not concerned with poetry's potential as a weapon against that particular enemy, his sense that language was in need of such protection was typical of his time. In *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*, Eliot – almost inadvertently – allows us to glimpse one of the impulses behind his own writing on poetry: 'every poet would like, I fancy, to be able to think that he had some direct social utility'. And although he goes on to insist that 'poetry is of course not to be defined by its uses', the somewhat wistful foregoing comment and the substance of many of his essays on poetry – not to say their very titles, like 'The Social Function of Poetry' – betray his determination to demonstrate that poetry does indeed have some kind of utility.⁵⁶ Though, like Heaney's, the emphasis of Eliot's defence of poetry would change over time, the conviction that poetry is the highest form of language predominates. The ramifications of this conviction for other, later defenders of poetry, as well as for the identification of poetry's specific enemies, are clear. It serves, as we will see, as a point of contact between Heaney and Eliot, both in its direct influence on the Irishman and in its presence, however substratal, in the genealogical line of defences between the two writers.

Defences of poetry are always a means of defining the poet's responsibilities, his or her primary allegiances. For Shelley, the deepest obligation is clearly to the imagination. For Eliot, however, as he asserts in 'The Social Function of Poetry', the poet's first duty is 'to preserve, and ... to extend and improve' his or her '*language*', and his second duty, fulfilled via language, is to society as a whole.⁵⁷

[poetry] makes a difference to the speech, to the sensibility, to the lives of all the members of a society, to all the members of the community, to the whole people, whether they read and enjoy poetry or not; even, in fact, whether they know the names of their greatest poets or not.⁵⁸

The benefits of poetry result from its linguistic virtues: social amelioration begins, Eliot implies, with linguistic improvement. The art form, he writes, has value because it

⁵⁵ George Orwell, 'Politics and the English Language', in *The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell*, vol. IV, ed. S. Orwell and I. Angus, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970).

⁵⁶ Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, 154, 155.

⁵⁷ T.S. Eliot, 'The Social Function of Poetry', in *On Poetry and Poets*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), 20.

⁵⁸ Eliot, *On Poetry*, 22.

expands the scope of our consciousness and ‘refines our sensibility’; and rather like the fluoride added at the source of a water system, it has an effect on the oral, and consequently mental hygiene of all, whether they are aware of it or not.⁵⁹ In this he is again like Pound, who claims that poetry ‘has to do with the clarity and vigour of “any and every” thought and opinion ... with maintaining the very cleanliness of the tools, the health of the very matter of thought itself’.⁶⁰ Poetry – by operating on the common coin of consciousness, language itself, cleansing it of the impurities that inevitably build up in it – is uniquely placed to benefit society and indeed to preserve the health of the body politic.⁶¹

Furthermore, at the time of his writing, Eliot feels his nation to be on the brink of a sociolinguistic catastrophe; and his portrayal of the consequences should poetry fail in its sanitising mission clarifies the degree to which he holds the art form to be useful in the most practical, vital sense. His impression of his mother tongue in the middle part of the twentieth century is not unlike that expressed in a certain kind of ‘letter to the editor’ in South African newspapers post-1994, inevitably written by the white, English-speaking and middle-aged – an impression of ‘a chaos of language, in which there are discoverable no standard of writing, and an increasing indifference to etymology and the history of the use of words’. The remedy, for Eliot, is to remind poets and critics of their ‘responsibility ... for the preservation of the language’;⁶² and the consequences of their allowing linguistic chaos to perpetuate, of poets failing in their task to nurture and protect the language, to wring out the muck of unrefined and hackneyed expression, is described

⁵⁹ Eliot, *On Poetry*, 18.

⁶⁰ Ezra Pound, ‘How To Read’, in *The Literary Essays of Ezra Pound*, (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1979), 21.

⁶¹ Eliot’s view of the writing process is wholly in keeping with his conception of poetry’s effects on the language. Writing poetry is a ‘negative’ process, characterised by ‘a sudden relief from an intolerable burden’, the unblocking of the psyche from something essentially unsound. For Eliot, as Schuchard points out, there is a ‘strange relation between certain kinds of morbid illness and creativity’, and the process of writing seems to him analogous, at times, with the removal of an obstacle to physical health. (Ronald Schuchard, *Eliot’s Dark Angel: Intersections of Life and Art*, (New York: Oxford University Press USA, 2001), 16; Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, 144-145.)

⁶² T.S. Eliot, ‘Johnson as Critic and Poet’, in *On Poetry and Poets*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1957), 192. Pound, too, was convinced of the dangers of language decay, warning that when ‘the application of word to thing goes rotten ... the whole machinery of social and individual thought goes to pot’. (Qtd in Harold Kaplan, *Poetry, Politics & Culture: Argument in the Work of Eliot, Pound, Stevens & Williams*, (London: Transaction Publishers, 2007), 47.)

frankly by the Modernist writer in the introduction to *The Use of Poetry and the Use of Criticism*:

the people which ceases to care for its literary inheritance becomes barbaric; the people which ceases to produce literature ceases to move in thought and sensibility. The poetry of a people takes its life from the people's speech, and in turn gives life to it; and represents its highest point of consciousness, its greatest power and its most delicate sensibility.⁶³

From this we can see that, for Eliot, poetry is not just coincidentally useful; it is one of the foundation-stones of civilisation itself. If poetry is neglected, or otherwise subject to indifference, a society will – such is the dire force of Eliot's prediction – effectively disintegrate.

It is similarly clear that, in Eliot's conception, poetry is tasked with carrying an enormous burden. It is not just one source of that which Dr Johnson, for instance, was pointing to when he remarked that literature should 'enable readers better to enjoy life or better to endure it', but it is also the very scaffolding that enables a social structure to stand.⁶⁴ Why it should be seen in this light is demonstrated in Eliot's own writing. If poetry is the pre-eminent linguistic operation of which human beings are capable, it is not only prior to any other discipline or activity which one might care to name – sociology, philosophy, and science, not least – but it should be recognised and regarded as such. Whether this view carries real weight, or whether it is a kind of grandiloquent hope (despite Eliot's always staid phrasing of the matter) is, of course, open to debate. While we might agree that some of Eliot's own work does, in his paraphrase of Mallarmé in 'Little Gidding', 'purify the dialect of the tribe' (his poetic rendering of the same argument), there seems no reason why good prose, for instance, should not be equally equipped to perform this function. Orwell, for one, would have been of this conviction. In any case, there are enough instances of poetry – even, it could be argued, certain passages in Eliot himself – which offend against Pound's maxim in 'How To Read': 'great literature is simply language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree'.⁶⁵

⁶³ Eliot, *The Use of Poetry*, 15.

⁶⁴ Samuel Johnson, Review of Soame Jenyns' *A Free Enquiry into the Nature and Origin of Evil* (1757), in Donald Greene, ed., *The Oxford Authors: Samuel Johnson*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 536.

⁶⁵ Pound, *Literary Essays*, 23.

Perhaps with a sense of the tenuousness of his own argument, its over-reaching nature, Eliot will, in the latter part of his career especially, claim a slightly different utility for poetry. As one of Eliot's biographers, Lyndall Gordon, affirms, for the later Eliot

the rhythmic words of poetry must be an alternative to God's burning Word. A classic language, precise, ordered, wide open to both old and new, receptive to subtleties of thought and feeling, might become ... a perfected vessel for timeless content.⁶⁶

This notion of poetry as a kind of ladder to God is the culmination of Eliot's thought about its role in relation to language: no longer merely a linguistically purifying force at work in society, poetry becomes a means of spiritual sanctification. There are states of consciousness in Eliot's conception of poetry which are finally, emphatically religious, moments of transcendent vision which it is the poet's duty – certainly it was Eliot's own self-appointed task – to adumbrate. In this way, poetry, always obliged to work with a language which, Eliot claimed, was subject to decay and imprecision, could not only perform the essential, socially hygienic function of refreshing that stale language, but it could aspire to using it in such a way that it was not something apart from the language of divine revelation, indeed the Word of God. The ambition for it to be such was, as Eliot was forced to acknowledge, a hopeless one both for himself as a writer and for poetry.⁶⁷ Yet it was, for him, finally the only worthwhile aspiration of the art form – the one that redeemed poetry itself (which being part of the fallen world was no less in need of redemption than any other aspect or activity).

As we will see, Heaney stands in marked contrast to such ambitions for his art. While his defence is unapologetically and characteristically imbued with a sense of the numinous, as well as a wealth of religious metaphor, he never reduces poetry to the status of spiritual instrument, ancillary to religious illumination. In a sense, by grounding his defence in the imagination, ultimately of that Romantic provenance which Eliot ostensibly abhorred (although in practice, as C.K. Stead points out, he in fact 'wore the ribbons of one party while in the secrecy of the polling booth compulsively voting for the

⁶⁶ Lyndall Gordon, *T.S. Eliot: An Imperfect Life*, (London: Vintage, 1998), 387.

⁶⁷ Gordon, 491.

other'), Heaney is able to provide a more far-reaching defence of poetry, unattached to any doctrinal ends, than Eliot.⁶⁸

Of course, every aspect of Eliot's central argument can be called into question. His fundamentally utilitarian view of poetry can be compared, for instance, with that of writers like Basil Bunting, who, as the contemporary Australian poet Les Murray points out, objected strongly to the idea of poetry as 'useful' at all.⁶⁹ Eliot, Bunting claimed, was unavoidably influenced by the utilitarian outlook of his time, in view of which

it is wrong to loaf and gawp about instead of working steadily at something useful, and of course it is wrong and foolish to write poetry unless it can be seen to purify the dialect of the tribe or keep the plebs in order or perform some other useful function.⁷⁰

This, as we have seen, was the very conviction plaguing Eliot as he wrote 'Little Gidding'. In Bunting's opinion, poetry makes no significant contribution to the 'process of thought' – a fact which does not lessen the pleasure we derive from poems.⁷¹ W.B. Stanford underlines the problems of the utilitarian stance in *Enemies of Poetry*, which is not unlike the position of all 'moralist' critics, who consider it imperative that poetry contribute to a better society by positively influencing its citizens. That there is not, in our time or any other, evidence suggesting even a fragile connection between literary sophistication and moral rectitude is something that Stanford goes on to point out. And it makes the position of such critics untenable.⁷² Poetry, Bunting argues, needs no more justification than the singing of a bird; it is a natural, an instinctive part of the human creature.⁷³

Eliot, however, writes as a poet under pressure to conform his art to the utilitarian standard of his time and place, and doing so he betrays, in the exaggerated nature of his

⁶⁸ C.K. Stead, 'Eliot, Arnold, and the English Poetic Tradition', in *The Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot: New Essays*, ed. D. Newton-De Molina, (London: The Athlone Press, 1977), 200.

⁶⁹ Les Murray, 'Poems and Poesies', in *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose*, (London: Carcanet Press, 1992), 341.

⁷⁰ Bunting qtd in Murray, 341.

⁷¹ Murray, 341.

⁷² W.B. Stanford, *Enemies of Poetry*, (London: Routledge, 1980), 4-5. Eliot himself, while acknowledging that a moralist critic was 'a worthy and serious thing to be', considered such critics nonetheless 'imperfect', despite the common ground he shared with them. (T.S. Eliot, 'Imperfect Critics', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, (London: Methuen and Co., 1928), 41.)

⁷³ Murray, 342.

claims, an understandable anxiety. His insistence, for example, that the scope of poetry's influence is not affected by the size of its audience, while not without its own, albeit somewhat strained, logic, seems characterised by desperation rather than complete conviction. Zagajewski, in 'A Defense of Ardor', suggests that the entire genre of the defence is characterised by just this.

It is a desperate genre, with something panic-stricken about it. The titles themselves, which struggle to convince us of poetry's 'necessity', vitality, indispensability, sound nonetheless suspiciously close to capitulation. If you have to insist so strenuously...⁷⁴

Eliot's – and Pound's – abundant use of scientific metaphors for the work of poetry is also telling in this regard;⁷⁵ adopting the language of the discipline which has, historically, most threatened their own, they try, in a sense, to smuggle poetry into the world of fact and function, to prove it acceptable and objective through figurative comparison.⁷⁶ Heaney will inherit Eliot's anxiety, to be sure; but, as my next three chapters will show, his manner of allaying it will be rather different.

This is not to say that the Irish poet is without his own beliefs in the social, healthful benefits of poems.

They do get something aggrieved out of their authors' systems, but their purpose is as public as it is personal. They act like their society's immunity systems, going to attack whatever unhealthy or debilitating forces are at work in the body politic. And in this, they manifest poetry's highest potential, its function as an agent of possible transformation, of evolution towards that more radiant and generous life which the imagination desires.⁷⁷

Heaney's reference to the health of society is strongly reminiscent of Eliot's terminology; in fact, they would seem to be of one mind on this score. As revealed in the above

⁷⁴ Adam Zagajewski, 'A Defense of Ardor', in *A Defense of Ardor: Essays*, trans. C. Cavanagh, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2004), 16.

⁷⁵ In, for example, Eliot's 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', the components of the writing process include, figuratively, 'particles', 'compounds', 'elements', a 'catalyst' and a 'filament of platinum'. (T.S. Eliot, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism*, (London: Methuen and Co., 1928).)

⁷⁶ Kaplan, 2.

⁷⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'A Torchlight Procession of One: On Hugh MacDiarmid', in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 114-115.

quotation from one of his essays, for Heaney, as for Eliot, poetry is a kind of supreme antioxidant in the bloodstream of the body politic. Yet – and this distinction is critical – in the Irish writer's view, this apparently utilitarian function of the art form is merely a happy consequence of poetry's performing its most crucial function, which is, for Heaney, all about being *itself*. The exceptional thing about poetry, his essays reveal, is that simply by remaining true to that which uniquely constitutes it, the demands of its own form – without ulterior social purpose – it can, paradoxically, accomplish a wholly profitable range of effects, social not least.

Many a critic has drawn attention to Eliot's extraordinary sensibility, his ability to divine and unearth poetry in places where others saw none. This is, one suspects, in good part a function of what Eliot called 'the auditory imagination', that capacity unique to the poet, and always conspicuous in the great poet, to hear in language, at a pre-semantic level, those phonetic properties which would literally empower a poem, making the art itself the most potent and memorable form of human speech. (Almost every phrase that Eliot 'steals' from another poet or dramatist gives evidence of this.) But at no point does Eliot make use of this concept, admittedly only briefly sketched in 'Matthew Arnold', in advancing his argument for the social utility of poetry. He is, rather, describing those dynamics of creativity that are at work in any true poet's practice.

For Heaney, on the other hand, the auditory imagination becomes the very essence of the matter of poetry's purpose. In fact, it is a mark of Heaney's own distinctive, if very different, sensibility, amounting like Eliot's to a kind of genius at times, that he is able to make use (albeit with his own modulations) of ostensibly minor notions like Eliot's, and deploy them to give added weight to his own defence of poetry. This is also one of his great characteristics as a critic, indeed as a reader: he is a supreme borrower and amalgamator of his sources.

IV

The idea of poetry's linguistically prophylactic effects remains as a constantly recurring, underlying element in the work of many another defender of poetry. And, given the nature of twentieth-century history, it could not have been otherwise. In the case of Wallace Stevens, however, we find a very different kind of reason advanced for the

necessity of poetry. In his conception, it is poetry's genetic ability to withstand not so much the degenerative effects of linguistic misuse, but the burden of reality itself, existential as well as political, that makes the art form all-important to humankind. Poetry again and again justifies its existence because, at root, it enables us not only to endure, but to prevail against the human condition as such. Central to this claim is the fact that the art form provides us with the most complete embodiment of the workings of the imagination. And – hence the importance of Wallace Stevens in any account of Seamus Heaney – this will be cardinal for the latter as well.

The Necessary Angel, Stevens' 1951 collection of critical prose, is subtitled *Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, and it is the opening essay, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', which best presents his understanding of the relationship between these two aspects of our experience. For Stevens, it is of paramount importance that the imaginative faculty exists in a symbiotic relationship with reality: if the imagination abandons all that is real for sheer fantasy, its effects may be intense, but they will be short-lived and ultimately impotent:

the imagination loses vitality as it ceases to adhere to what is real. When it adheres to the unreal and intensifies what is unreal, while its first effect may be extraordinary, that effect is the maximum effect that it will ever have.⁷⁸

This caveat is, as we will see, the obvious precursor to Heaney's insistence in *The Redress of Poetry* that poetry be equal in its complexity and gravity to the reality out of which it arises.⁷⁹ For both Stevens and Heaney, poetry is defined by its embodiment of the imagination, but that embodiment must have, in Stevens' words, 'the strength of reality or none at all'.⁸⁰ Writers must at the same time beware, however, that they do not allow the imagination to give way under the weight of reality; a balance between the two is essential.⁸¹ More and more, Stevens writes, we are succumbing to what he calls 'the

⁷⁸ Wallace Stevens, 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words', in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, (New York: Random House, 1942), 6.

⁷⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'The Redress of Poetry', in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 8.

⁸⁰ Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 7.

⁸¹ Cf Coleridge's distinction, in his *Biographia Literaria*, between 'fancy' and the imagination. The value of fancy, the lowest form of imaginative thought, is compromised because it 'has no other counters to play with but fixities and definites' – it is entirely limited in its activities by pre-existing objects and ideas, too

pressure of reality'. In part, this is owing to changes in lifestyle and education; but these pale in comparison with 'the pressure of an external event or events on the consciousness to the exclusion of any power of contemplation'.⁸² The most obvious such event for Stevens, of course, is World War II. The task of poetry, in the face of such calamities, is described in one of his most famous passages, in which he describes what he refers to as the 'nobility' found, in particular, in poetry:

it is a violence from within that protects us from a violence without. It is the imagination pressing back against the pressure of reality. It seems, in the last analysis, to have something to do with our self-preservation, and that, no doubt, is why the expression of it, the sound of its words, helps us to live our lives.⁸³

Much of Stevens' work is focused on this delicate relationship: on the one hand, the importance of the imagination resisting the actual, and on the other the equal importance of the imagination coordinating its operations with reality, for 'reality is the central reference for poetry'.⁸⁴ Daniel Tobin speaks of Stevens' 'ideal equilibrium between poetry and reality, between transcendence and immanence'.⁸⁵ Reality and the imagination, Stevens writes, are 'equal and inseparable'.⁸⁶ Without the imagination, we cannot properly perceive, or indeed conceive of, reality; and without acknowledging the real, the imagination cannot be of any use to us.

This notion of equality underlies Stevens' views on poetry's truth-telling function: 'poetic truth is an agreement with reality', and not subject to it.⁸⁷ Whatever moral truths or ethical precepts the poet's work might present, Stevens claims, these are secondary to the primary function of poetry and its truths – which may, in literal terms, be lies – namely, the enactment of the imagination. Without the latter, our perceptions of the world are, in effect, disabled; we cannot clearly see or productively consider the otherwise

much subject, in other words, to reality. (Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria: Or, Biographical Sketches of My Literary Life and Opinions*, (New York: William Gowans, 1852), 378.)

⁸² Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 18, 20.

⁸³ Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 36.

⁸⁴ Wallace Stevens, 'Three Academic Pieces', in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, (New York: Random House, 1942), 71.

⁸⁵ Daniel Tobin, *Passage to the Centre: Imagination and the Sacred in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, (Kentucky: University Press of Kentucky, 1999), 274.

⁸⁶ Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 24.

⁸⁷ Wallace Stevens, 'The Figure of the Youth as a Virile Poet', in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*, (New York: Random House, 1942), 54.

overwhelming burden of the real.⁸⁸ In his or her disposition to fabricate, to invent, in short to imagine, lies the power of the poet:

what makes the poet the potent figure that he is ... is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing it and that he gives to life the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it.⁸⁹

In Stevens' thinking, the fictions secreted by the imagination are necessary, and vitally so, because our existence as human beings is, to put it bluntly, inconceivable without them. Poetry, the cardinal product of the imagination, is a biological, an evolutionary necessity; it gives 'life whatever savour it possesses'.⁹⁰ Without the fictions that the imagination produces, with the poet their chief crafter, we would be cognitively destitute. We would not be able to apprehend the life we live, the circumstances in which we are placed, let alone endure them. We would, in a crucial sense, be blind. The poet, in terms of this metaphor, is our eyes, our sight. He or she constructs our reality by giving us those tools – myths, for example – without which we would be lost. The *Divine Comedy*, its drama of sin and redemption, is not just a story of Dante's Christian providence, but a way of arranging our minds and our lives, and bringing a coherence to our passage through the world; a world which, thanks to Dante's imagination, becomes not just an aimless, trackless wandering through a dark wood, but a pilgrimage from the fallen world to beatification. In his 'Adagia', Stevens declares that 'after one has abandoned a belief in god, poetry is that essence which takes its place as life's redemption': thus poetry, and the order it provides, becomes our secular salvation.⁹¹

Critchley uses the metaphor of illumination to understand Stevens' idea of the way in which the imagination acts upon reality:

poetry, for Stevens, is the description of a particular ... in the radiant atmosphere produced by the imagination. Poetic acts are acts of the mind, which describe

⁸⁸ Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 28-29.

⁸⁹ Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 31.

⁹⁰ Stevens, *Opus Posthumous*, 185.

⁹¹ Wallace Stevens, 'Adagia', in *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose*, revised, enlarged and corrected edition, ed. M.J. Bates, (New York: Knopf, 1989), 185.

recognisable things, but which vary the appearance of those things, changing the aspect under which they are seen.⁹²

More than merely altering our perception of reality, Stevens observes in ‘The Collect of Philosophy’, poetry enlightens us as to the existence of a life, a world, part of and yet beyond our own in its import and extent:

[a] sense of the infinity of the world is a sense of something cosmic. It is cosmic poetry because it makes us realize ... that we are creatures not of a part, which is our every day limitation, but of a whole for which, for the most part, we have as yet no language. This sudden change of a lesser life for a greater one is like a change of winter for spring or any other transmutation of poetry ... A realization of the infinity of the world is equally a perception of philosophy and a typical metamorphosis of poetry.⁹³

For Stevens – as later for Heaney – poetry offers the closest experience possible in a post-Romantic age to the transcendent; but for the American Modernist, that transcendence is simply an aspect of the mundane.⁹⁴ His poetry, as Jonathan Levin points out, is about uncovering that infinite universe, revealing ‘the extraordinary dimension of the ordinary’, and Stevens’ view of poetry rests on its power to ‘refine and extend’ our ability to perceive the world in which we live.⁹⁵

Wallace Stevens’ defence of poetry is, ultimately, a defence of the imagination and its unavoidable necessity for any life that is to be fully human. As Kaplan describes it, Stevens ‘rather soberly ... studied the poetic imagination and universalized it as a source of value’, arguing that it was integral to life and thus expressing an essentially Romantic viewpoint.⁹⁶ The primary criticism to which Stevens’ argument is vulnerable is, inadvertently, contained in an assertion by Levin that ‘poetry’s vital integration of imagination and reality leads Stevens to embrace fiction, or poetic distortion, as an aspect

⁹² Simon Critchley, *Things Merely Are: Philosophy in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 43.

⁹³ Wallace Stevens, ‘The Collect of Philosophy’, in *Opus Posthumous: Poems, Plays, Prose*, ed. S.F. Morse, (New York: Knopf, 1957), 271.

⁹⁴ Critchley, 21.

⁹⁵ Jonathan Levin, *The Poetics of Transition: Emerson, Pragmatism, and American Literary Modernism*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 167, 169.

⁹⁶ Kaplan, x.

of true understanding'.⁹⁷ From one point of view, one could say that the defining activity of the imagination is the creation of lies, the softening of the abrasions which reality inflicts upon us. Czeslaw Milosz implies as much when, in one of the notes included in his collection of reflections, *Roadside Dog*, he writes, 'those fantasies, those pageants constructed by the human mind above the horror of life. All arts, all myths, and philosophies ...'.⁹⁸ As such, one might well argue that the readiness of a writer like Stevens to accept that lie, to perpetuate it, is, quite literally, delusional. Veiling the real, the imagination cannot but weaken, rather than strengthen, our grasp of it.

The very insistence, though, with which Stevens asserts the co-dependency of the imagination and the actual betrays his acute awareness of the above objection and his concern to rebut it. Similarly, he is aware of a paradox: namely, that it is through the creation of fictions that human beings are brought closest to the real. (This is indeed the defining paradox of the imagination itself, as Heaney will also acknowledge.) Julian Barnes, the English novelist, gives another, albeit more recent formulation of the same thing when he writes in his *Nothing To Be Frightened Of* that 'the novel tells the beautiful, shapely lies which enclose hard, exact truth'.⁹⁹ Poetry itself, of course, is a matter of language; and, as Nietzsche pointed out, language is fundamentally a lie, an 'endlessly broken echo of an original sound'.¹⁰⁰ Wallace Stevens would almost certainly agree – at least in one sense.

In his understanding, however, it could be said that the imagination is rather like the sacrament in Christian practice: in partaking of the wafer and the wine, one literally partakes of the body and blood of Christ. From one point of view, of course, this is an illusion; the wafer is a wafer, the wine, wine. But, sanctified by the order of service, both become another substance. And, become such, they disclose a reality which, for the believer, would not otherwise be apprehended. Moreover, both Stevens and Heaney are, like all poets, imbued with a certain sense of what it is to be human. Central to our humanity is the fact that we are not only sufferers of our condition, but imaginers of it at the same time. To engage in the latter is not extraneous or delusionary (though it may be

⁹⁷ Levin, 167.

⁹⁸ Czeslaw Milosz, *Roadside Dog*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1998), 44.

⁹⁹ Julian Barnes, *Nothing To Be Frightened Of*, (New York: Knopf, 2008), 78.

¹⁰⁰ Qtd in Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: From Kant to Nietzsche*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 290.

at times); rather it is constitutive. And providing working models of this imagining of our condition, often as intricate and yet accurate as a chronometer, poetry might also be called a kind of psychic DNA – it contains within it the original blueprint of what it is that makes us most humanly what we are. Hence its importance and hence its justification – and hence, perhaps, the ultimate strength, despite their vulnerability, of all defences based on this premise.

Stevens' essays are an implicit, rather than explicit defence of poetry, and they can, in my view, be more justifiably criticised on another account. In his essay 'Reflections on Wallace Stevens', Randall Jarrell says of poets in general, and Stevens in particular, that 'the poet's medium, words, is abstract to begin with, and it is only his unique organisation of the words that forces the poem, generalisations and all, over into the concreteness and singularity that it exists for'.¹⁰¹ In the case of Heaney's poetry, the process described here by Jarrell seems effortless. Heaney's vocabulary is so well-chosen, so earthy and tangible, that the concrete is only a turn of the head away; and even in his attempts to express the most ineffable effects of poetry in his prose writing, Heaney retains this grip on the actual. Stevens, though undeniably skilled at organising abstract words into concrete images in poems, is not nearly so adept in his prose. Where the Irishman's prose style is richly descriptive and passionately (while rationally) convincing, Stevens writes the dry, dense prose of a philosopher and of someone who is generally termed a philosophical poet. This is particularly evident in his writing about the connection between poetry and philosophy, as Simon Critchley points out in *Things Merely Are*: his attempts to depict in prose the relationship he so eloquently examines in his poetry are 'uneven, at best rather associative, and indeed poor in comparison to the power of his verse'.¹⁰² Despite the fact that, stylistic limitations notwithstanding, Stevens' conception of the relationship between reality and the imagination appears to have been invaluable to Heaney in the development of parts of his argument, when Stevens' work is read in its original form, the brilliance of the conception itself is almost lost in the methodical, phlegmatic monotony of his writing. In Heaney, on the contrary, that same

¹⁰¹ Randall Jarrell, *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, ed. B. Leithauser, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 127.

¹⁰² Critchley, 30-31.

conception is grounded in numerous exempla, and the radical paradox in the imagination's operations is illuminated in ways which are deeply, unfailingly persuasive.

V

On the face of it, few defenders of poetry would seem to provide a more exemplary model than W.H. Auden. Here was a poet who came of age on the cusp of the 1930s (which he would go on to characterise, in 'September 1, 1939', as a 'low, dishonest decade') and whose specific overt attempts to attribute to poetry a utility by making it socially responsive are among the best-known of his century.¹⁰³ His poetic and critical status, not to mention his insistence (at least for the early part of his career) on poetry's social efficacy, his implicit answer to the political accusation, make him an inevitable node in the genealogical branch of defenders at the end of which is Heaney. Unlike Heaney, however, Auden goes on to renounce poetry's utility as vehemently, as persistently, as he initially affirms it. The Irish writer argues consistently for poetry's social effects, even if he locates those effects on a different ground, and he never repudiates poetry's ability to change us in some way, thus significantly shifting our way of being in the world.

Lucy McDiarmid points out in her *Auden's Apologies for Poetry* that Auden was a writer obsessed with the potential (and later the impotence) of his art form to provide social and moral benefit; the strength of his rejection of poetry as useful reflects, she goes on to emphasise, the extent to which Auden had credited poetry with significant power in his earlier writing.¹⁰⁴ His essays on the operations of poetry, throughout his career, are weighted with religious metaphor. The creative act itself is depicted as an act of 'worship' directed towards what Auden calls 'sacred beings or events', which are defined in terms of their ability to inspire awe, to provoke the imagination.¹⁰⁵ Beauty, as embodied in poetry, is of benefit to us in that, as Auden writes elsewhere, 'through its

¹⁰³ W.H. Auden, *The English Auden: Poems, Essays and Dramatic Writings 1927-1939*, ed. E. Mendelson, (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 245-247.

¹⁰⁴ Lucy McDiarmid, *Auden's Apologies for Poetry*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 8, 11.

¹⁰⁵ W.H. Auden, 'Making, Knowing and Judging', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 57.

analogies, the goodness of created existence, the historical fall into unfreedom and disorder, and the possibility of regaining paradise through repentance and forgiveness are recognised'.¹⁰⁶ His gospel may be the gospel of poetry, but it is, in its chosen terms, also the Gospel of Christ. Through the reconciliation, in the poem, of the conflicted emotions within the poet, the achieved poem offers us a kind of absolution.

As one might expect from this, every aspect of poetry including its phonetic properties is bound up, in Auden's conception, with the moral. In the introduction to his 1935 collection *The Poet's Tongue*, defining poetry as 'memorable speech', Auden speaks of the oral power of poetry, which

must move our emotions or excite our intellect, for only that which is moving or exciting is memorable, and the stimulus is the audible spoken word and cadence, to which in all its power of suggestion and incantation we must surrender ...¹⁰⁷

It is evident from his phrasing that Auden attributes to sound more than merely the ability to give pleasure, whether aural or otherwise. Its purpose is higher than that, closer to something spiritual, or at least something enthralling, spellbinding, in the manner of ritual chanting. This persuasive poetic music moves us, as does every other element of the poem, towards social or political responsiveness. Poetry does not dictate the way we should go, but it is concerned

with extending our knowledge of good and evil, perhaps making the necessity for action more urgent and its nature more clear, but only leading us to the point where it is possible for us to make a rational and moral choice.¹⁰⁸

The art form's function is thus clear: its end result is ethical, as it presents us with the possibility of an action, while not necessarily impelling us in any one particular direction (as might propaganda). In short, if poetry is itself a kind of action, making something happen, it operates through a principle of indirection.

Later in *The Poet's Tongue*, in an argument which McDiarmid describes as crediting poetry with 'diffuse spiritual powers', Auden describes two different kinds of

¹⁰⁶ W.H. Auden, 'The Virgin & the Dynamo', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 71.

¹⁰⁷ Qtd in McDiarmid, 22.

¹⁰⁸ Auden, *The English Auden*, 329.

art, 'escape-art' and 'parable-art', making it clear that poetry's moral function is contingent on its relationship to the real.¹⁰⁹ The task of escape-art is, clearly, escapism; the task of parable-art is to teach humankind how to exchange the habits of hatred for those of love. The latter is unmistakably the more important type, the type that effects actual behavioural change in its readers, and Auden's use of the word 'parable' signals the shifting of his figurative apparatus firmly into a spiritual setting.¹¹⁰ The poetic parable, the poetic getting-to-grips with our real behaviour in the real world, is effective because, like all such poetry, its task is 'by telling the truth, to disenchant and disintoxicate'.¹¹¹ While we may, as Auden suggests in his essay on Robert Frost, long for beauty in poetry, and for the pleasure of that beauty, we will come to despise our intoxication with something that bears no resemblance to 'the problematic, the painful, the disorderly, the ugly' – to the world itself.¹¹² Poetry's social effects can only be accomplished when it represents, and does not provide escape from, the truth of the matter.

That matter, while it may have been a political one for many of his contemporaries in the 1930s, was not thus for the young Auden, as Michael Thurston points out in *Making Something Happen* – or at least it was not in the sense that he ever associated poetry, in his critical writing, with a particular brand of political thought. Though he himself was politically active both in his daily life and his poetry, he was wary of assigning to his art a political task to the exclusion of all others.¹¹³ His claims for poetry's moral benefits, however – and specifically the rendering of those benefits in terms of an increased power to make the right choice, to determine the right course of action and feel pressed to take it – are nonetheless broadly, strongly utilitarian, encompassing the political.

Auden's dismissal, out of hand, of this utilitarian argument and those like it in his later years – precipitated, not least, by his return to the Anglican faith of his childhood – took, predominantly, the form of an attack on the notion of poetry as politically

¹⁰⁹ McDiarmid, 24.

¹¹⁰ Auden, *The English Auden*, 341-342.

¹¹¹ Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 27.

¹¹² W.H. Auden, 'Robert Frost', in *The Dyer's Hand and Other Essays*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1963), 338.

¹¹³ Michael Thurston, *Making Something Happen: American Political Poetry Between the World Wars*, (North Carolina: UNC Press, 2001), 4.

efficacious. It was this, which, in all functional claims for poetry, was most deeply offensive to the poet, particularly in the aftermath of World War II. Explaining his about-face to Anne Fremantle in 1973, he remarked: 'I know that all the verse I wrote, all the positions I took in the thirties, didn't save a single Jew. These attitudes, these writings, only help oneself. They merely make people who think like one, admire and like one ...', ¹¹⁴

Auden's best-known statement, in either poetry or prose, on poetry's utility, is, of course, in his memorial poem for W.B. Yeats, the second section of which reads

You were silly like us; your gift survived it all:
the parish of rich women, physical decay,
yourself. Mad Ireland hurt you into poetry.
Now Ireland has her madness and her weather still,
for poetry makes nothing happen: it survives
in the valley of its making where executives
would never want to tamper, flows on south
from ranches of isolation and the busy griefs,
raw towns that we believe and die in; it survives,
a way of happening, a mouth. ¹¹⁵

That 'poetry makes nothing happen' has come to be, as Thurston suggests (and as my own citation of it, more than once, in the above sections reflects), an 'epitaph' for poetry in modern times, engraved on the minds of poets and critics alike. We often forget, as a result – and as perhaps Auden himself does wilfully in subsequent years – that his full statement here of poetry's purpose is, as Thurston goes on to point out, more complex, and implies for the art form a place in a much greater, more intricate scheme of things. ¹¹⁶ The lines in question were written at the very moment, if you like, of the revolution in Auden's thought, and one of his biographers, Humphrey Carpenter, traces the writing of Yeats' elegy during 1939 and the parallel development of Auden's conviction that poetry is, finally, useless. After delivering a series of political lectures in America, shortly after moving there, and finding himself disgusted by his own talent as a rhetorician, Auden added his declaration of poetry's ineffectiveness to 'In Memory of W.B. Yeats'.

¹¹⁴ Anne Fremantle, 'Reality and Religion', in *WH Auden: A Tribute*, ed. S. Spender, (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975), 89.

¹¹⁵ W.H. Auden, *Collected Poems*, (London: Vintage, 1991), 248.

¹¹⁶ Thurston, 3.

In these lines, all Auden's attempts during the previous ten years to involve his poetry in politics and society were categorically rejected. He reiterated that rejection, in the words of the 'Counsel for the Defence', in his obituary article on Yeats, which was probably written at the same time as the new section of the poem: 'Art', he wrote, 'is a product of history, not a cause ... so that the question of whether art should or should not be propaganda is unreal ... If not a poem had been written, not a picture painted, not a bar of music composed, the history of man would be materially unchanged.' Auden was to repeat this, in similar words, again and again for the rest of his life.¹¹⁷

Thus, in Auden's later years, he begins to advance, as McDiarmid calls it, 'a poetics of apology and self-deprecation, a radical undermining of poetry itself'.¹¹⁸ His justifications for poetry lose their emphasis on the moral and spiritual, on anything of use at all, with the exception of a dilute utilitarian faith he retains in the ability of poetry to purify the language (as Eliot also has it). In a 1974 *Paris Review* interview, Auden describes the poet's 'only ... political duty' – namely, 'in his own writing to set an example of the correct use of his mother tongue which is always being corrupted'.¹¹⁹ Aside from that responsibility, poetry's status is no more significant, for the most part, than that of a parlour game. His point of reference, in rejecting poetry's usefulness, is, again and again, the political:

the social and political history of Europe would be just the same if Shakespeare, Dante and Goethe had never written. The only people who affect the political climate are journalists who try and produce the truth, and writers in countries where there is no freedom – so any statement from any writer carries weight.¹²⁰

No doubt there was any number of complex psycho-biographical factors – perhaps a personal sense of defeat – that gave impetus to this radical *volte-face* as to the value of the art form in the later Auden's career. Accompanying his sense of the uselessness of poetry was the conviction that poetry actually falsifies true feeling. The art which once served a predominantly truth-telling, moral purpose was now a source of fabrication and dishonesty. 'As if by a chemical reaction,' McDiarmid writes, 'the

¹¹⁷ Humphrey Carpenter, *W.H. Auden: A Biography*, (London: Unwin Paperbacks, 1981), 256.

¹¹⁸ McDiarmid, 11.

¹¹⁹ W.H. Auden, interview by Michael Newman, *Paris Review* 57 (1974): 42.

¹²⁰ Qtd in Fremantle, 89.

moment the feelings hit the page they become false'.¹²¹ This process is unavoidable – the nature of poetry, for Auden at this stage, is inevitably bogus. One of its few redeeming features is its ability, by no means unique to the art form, to 'delight, sadden, disturb, amuse, instruct'. It may remind us of certain political, moral and spiritual realities, but it has no real power – not, at any rate, half the power of plain journalistic prose – to make a difference.¹²²

One can see at work in the foregoing a kind of extreme literalism. Auden evidently believes that if a work of art does not have a quantifiable political effect – literally, physically, saving a Jew – then it has no political effect whatsoever. The logic here is far from cast-iron, and the cut-and-dried nature of Auden's renunciation of the political efficacy of poetry, while it also might express his exasperation at the sometimes grandiloquent claims for precisely the opposite, ignores the evidence of his own poems themselves. One suspects that in rejecting poetry's political potential, he is registering, unwittingly, the marginalisation of the art form itself, in the light of which all such claims for its socio-political effects become portentous and pretentious. In the same *Paris Review* interview, Auden remarks on the degenerative effects of television and radio on the language of the general populace; perhaps he had in mind, too, the disadvantage of those media to the status of poetry itself.¹²³ Shelley's 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' becomes mere hot air in an historical moment when poets not only obviously do not legislate but are not even read.

Heaney has always been a deeply appreciative reader of the early Auden, alert in particular to the role of sound in his poems – to a selection of which, in the essay 'Sounding Auden', Heaney tells us he will 'listen'.¹²⁴ There is an obvious affinity between these two at times word-mad poets. Likewise, Heaney's infinitely subtle sense of the way in which a poem is an action, even though it does not necessarily, directly, effect social change, is very close to Auden's claim that poetry is a way of happening. Nevertheless – and this is the crucial point – poetry, for Heaney, is never a game, and its delight is never simply a distraction. While even the early Auden speaks of

¹²¹ McDiarmid, 44.

¹²² Auden, *The Dyer's Hand*, 60.

¹²³ Auden, *Paris Review*, 42.

¹²⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'Sounding Auden', in *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 109.

‘disintoxication’ as the final effect of an achieved poem, Heaney establishes a certain intoxication as being a rightful and necessary constituent of the art form itself. For Heaney, in fact, the intoxicating and truth-telling functions of poetry are not finally separable; for Auden, the one is necessarily, puritanically, in opposition to the other. Moreover, Heaney, unlike Auden, has never succumbed to social despair; poetry continues, in his conception, to have a kind of political efficacy, a social utility, even if this might not be measurable or immediate in its effects. Not only does Heaney argue that poetry has such efficacy, but he goes so far as to advance the idea that poets, by being absolutely faithful to their art form, can, even in a country like Stalinist Russia, for example, have an effect, not least of defiance, which has far-reaching political ramifications.

There is evidence enough that Auden was aware of the changed status of poetry in the mid part of the twentieth century. In 1949, for instance, he declared that ‘We live in a new age in which the artist can neither have ... a unique heroic importance nor believes [sic] in the Art-God enough to desire it’.¹²⁵ His sentiments, by this stage, are resolutely anti-Romantic. Heaney, on the other hand, has never lost his faith in that god, even though he would never use such phraseology. Whether we attribute it to his temperament or his time of writing, his faith, as we will see, has not faltered. Nor is this faith a blind one; it rests, concretely, demonstrably, in an undying sense of the ways in which that most complex of all human linguistic usages, poetry, operates.

VI

Randall Jarrell is widely recognised to have been the best American poetry critic of his time – the middle of the twentieth century – ‘with an unanswerable flair of understanding, an intelligent passion for poetry equal to the poets’ own, a prose that could hum beguilingly and, when necessary, sting’.¹²⁶ To be acknowledged as such was no small feat, given that he made his mark during what he himself christened ‘The Age of Criticism’ – a title he used disparagingly, but one which conveys nonetheless the

¹²⁵ W.H. Auden, *The Enchafed Flood: or, The Romantic Iconography of the Sea*, (New York: Random House, 1950), 150.

¹²⁶ Calvin Bedient, ‘Randall Jarrell and *Poetry and the Age*’, in *The Critics Who Made Us: Essays from Sewanee Review*, ed. G. Core, (Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1993), 280.

ascendancy of literary-critical writing at the time. And that predominance, along with the professionalisation of reading and writing in the academy that gave rise to it, was to become, more and more, the enemy of poetry. It was against this that Jarrell felt urged to defend the art form; rather than accuse poetry, the movement of literature from the streets into the university classroom posed an insidious threat identified and analysed with great foresight by Jarrell. In his satirical novel, first published in 1954, *Pictures from an Institution*, Jarrell describes, with eerie familiarity to the contemporary reader, a 'prominent literary critic', Mr Daudier:

he had a column of literary criticism, every week except the last two weeks in August, in the best-known literary weekly; he was a director of a club that picked books for readers who didn't know what to read; there are radio-programs which have several critics blame, and several critics and the author praise, some recent book, and Mr Daudier was generally on one side or the other; during the school year he would lecture to colleges, and when the school year was over he would make commencement addresses or get honorary degrees from them; he was the chief reader of a publishing house ... you saw one-act plays by him ... he even wrote informal essays ... But mostly he talked about great books – about a hundred of them; I don't know why he stopped at a hundred, but he did, and let the rest go; he must have made up his mind that it was no good trying to get people to read more than a hundred.¹²⁷

In this satire of the literary professional of the time, as much as in his overall portrayal of the threat presented to poetry by the critical trend of that era, Jarrell foreshadows the complaints of later twentieth- and twenty-first-century essayists on poetry – including Joseph Epstein and Dana Gioia. Such critics would see the increasing confinement of the art form, its practitioners, and its critics to the academy as having dealt (or very nearly dealt) a death blow to poetry. In 1953, Jarrell, in a remarkably prescient essay on the subject, laments that criticism has overtaken creativity as the spirit of the age, and that critics themselves are now regarded as being far more important than the object of their criticism, whether poetry or otherwise.¹²⁸ His defence against this unexpected enemy – which, as we will see, takes various shapes, all stemming from the Modernist trend of the time – shares with Heaney's defence its insistence on poetry as a profoundly natural,

¹²⁷ Randall Jarrell, *Pictures From An Institution: A Comedy*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 240.

¹²⁸ Randall Jarrell, 'The Age of Criticism', in *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, ed. B. Leithauser, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 281-297.

indeed genetic function of the human creature; and one which, Jarrell argues as Bunting did too, thus needs no justification beyond itself.

He states as much in his essay on 'The Obscurity of the Poet', declaring that poetry does not require a defence any more than the oxygen we inhale and the food we eat; every society of which we are aware includes, in its cultural cohort, poets.¹²⁹ Poetry has always and everywhere been in existence, and our conclusion must surely be, Jarrell implies, that our culture, we as a people, could not survive without it:

art matters not merely because it is the most magnificent ornament and the most nearly unfailing occupation of our lives, but because it is life itself ... art is indispensable because so much ... truth can be learned through works of art and through works of art alone.¹³⁰

Jarrell's assertion that poetry does not require a defence is, however, disingenuous. Much of his criticism is explicitly a defence of the art form, demonstrating how irreplaceable poems are, whether they be Frost's or Stevens' or Bishop's. The very intensity of his enthusiasm, his cherishing of poetry, is not just high spirits, but an urgent evangelism on behalf of an art form which he recognises – as do his contemporaries – to be in need of such advocacy.

The indispensability of poetry, and more generally of literature, figures in Jarrell's own critical preoccupation, which lies in the act of reading, of uncovering the truths we need to know and, in his role as critic, sharing his enthusiasms. As Vivian Gornick observes, while Jarrell's status as a poet undoubtedly influences the style of his criticism, the extraordinary attraction, the persuasion of his essays lies in his being, first and foremost, a reader; in this, perhaps above all, he is Heaney's kin.¹³¹ The problem he identifies in mid-twentieth-century literature is that its remaining readers – and he writes at length about the drastically decreasing popularity of poetry – have begun to read the wrong writing for the wrong reasons. Critics, he writes, with characteristic wit and energy, are 'often useful and wonderful and a joy to have around the house; *but they're*

¹²⁹ Randall Jarrell, 'The Obscurity of the Poet', in *No Other Book: Selected Essays*, ed. B. Leithauser, (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 16.

¹³⁰ Jarrell, 15.

¹³¹ Vivian Gornick, *The Men in My Life*, (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2008), 72.

the bane of our age, because our age so fantastically overestimates their importance and so willingly forsakes the work they are writing about for them'.¹³²

This gradual domination by professional literary criticism is, for Jarrell, the most vexing of a number of associated causes contributing to poetry's decline – the decline, in fact, of literature in general. The root of all of these is the perceived and indeed often actual difficulty of much Modernist writing itself. This gave rise, not least, to the so-called New Critics who heralded the first wave of professional readers in the academy.¹³³ Jarrell, however, is dismissive of those who do not read poetry because they claim it is too difficult: 'if we were in the habit of reading poets, their obscurity wouldn't matter; and once we are out of the habit, their clarity does not help'.¹³⁴ Modernist difficulty, whether reputed or real, is not the issue; the reading habits of society are the essence of the problem, and, at the moment in which he is writing, society is reading very little, too much of which is literary criticism instead of literature itself. In addition, Leonard Diepeveen remarks, Jarrell, in his attack on this neglect of the arts, draws attention to competing art forms and the instant, easy gratification available from popular entertainment.¹³⁵ When one considers that the 1950s were the decade which saw an exponential increase in household televisions in the United States, until, by 1960, television was the pre-eminent source of popular culture in North America, that fear seems more than justified.¹³⁶

What, in all of this, is the role of the poet, that shadowy, neglected or else maligned figure? Poetry, for Jarrell as for Heaney, has transformative powers, and, as Stevens also believed, those powers reside in its capacity to reveal a new and different world within the realities of our own. As demonstrated in the passage (quoted in IV above) from Jarrell's 'Reflections on Wallace Stevens', a poet should, in that critic's view, pay first homage to the concrete. Jarrell goes on to quote Goethe on the importance of locating the general in the specific – the closer the poet scrutinises the singular instance of an object, the more universally valuable, universally true, his or her

¹³² Jarrell, 295.

¹³³ Stephen Fredman, *A Concise Companion to Twentieth-Century American Poetry*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 47.

¹³⁴ Jarrell, 4.

¹³⁵ Leonard Diepeveen, *The Difficulties of Modernism*, (London: Routledge, 2003), 243.

¹³⁶ Morley Winograd and Michael D. Hais, *Millennial Makeover: MySpace, YouTube, and the Future of American Politics*, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2008), 61.

observations will be.¹³⁷ In this way, as Jarrell describes it elsewhere, the poet opens the way to ‘a foreign country whose laws and language and life are a kind of translation of your own’; a world, in other words, different from and yet like the one in which we live.¹³⁸

This is an echo of the argument that dates back to Sidney and recurs in Heaney: poetry, by examining reality in all its richness and detail, grants us access to another, better, reality. The terms of this claim change from generation to generation, but in holding this view Jarrell positions himself firmly in the line of defenders from Sidney to Heaney (the fundamentally, albeit to varying degrees, Romantic line). His place in this order of poet-critics and his adherence to their common beliefs notwithstanding, Jarrell is, for my purposes, primarily significant because of his warning against, his ominous prediction of, an age in which literature’s own offspring would turn against it, in unwitting Oedipal fashion, and become a threat to, in particular, the status of poetry. As the first writer to identify this threat, to give significant expression to it, Jarrell becomes a prophet of the era in which Heaney will come to defend poetry.

There is another important respect in which Jarrell is a predecessor to Heaney; that is, the particular style he forges or otherwise deploys in his own criticism. It connects with the reader directly, intimately, engaging with him or her both emotionally and intellectually. This is a critical manner which, while not without precedence, ran very much contrary to that age of criticism which Jarrell stigmatised. If he was going to protect and defend poetry against its demotion to merely the material of criticism, and by definition therefore inferior, he was going to do everything but adopt the elaborate and self-serving jargons of the professional critic of his time. His is a style designed to let the general reader in, not shut him or her out. It is one of Jarrell’s articles of faith that the value of poetry is such that it should be possible to write about it without becoming unduly technical or theoretical. In fact, to write academically (at least in its more Alexandrian tendencies) about it is – such is the suggestion of much of his writing – to betray the importance of literature, and poetry specifically. It is to be complicit in that demotion of the art form.

¹³⁷ Goethe qtd in Jarrell, 128.

¹³⁸ Jarrell, 9.

There is a sense in which, though there is no evidence of direct influence, Heaney will become the natural inheritor of Jarrell's manner, while enriching that democratic style with a vocabulary, a turn of speech, a metaphorical reach, which goes beyond that of Jarrell himself. Heaney has been alert to the degree to which there are forms of criticism in the contemporary world which, in their approach to literature, both explicitly and implicitly assume the inferiority of the art, regarding it as if it were some kind of recidivist, constitutionally inclined towards sin and error. In his own criticism, Heaney will resist this view; almost the only times in which, in his prose, he betrays even a flicker of irritation is when he refers to the more accusatory forms of postmodern or postcolonial criticism.¹³⁹ Critics in such schools may not be Heaney's primary opponents, as it were, in the trial against poetry, but they contribute nonetheless to the evidence, the accusation, against the art form.

VII

Like Randall Jarrell, Joseph Brodsky, the Russian-American poet and critic, was one of the great enthusiasts for poetry, and his essays on the subject reflect as much. Exiled from the Soviet Union in 1972, he settled in the United States and became, as Cynthia L. Haven puts it, 'an erudite Nobel laureate and international man of letters', a kind of spokesperson for poetry.¹⁴⁰ In this, not least, he is like Heaney, and he takes his place as a natural point of comparison with the Irish writer because of his equal prominence in late twentieth-century poetry criticism. Given his particular origins, it is not surprising that his emphases and the very language in which he couches them are rather different from those of any American critic, or, for that matter, Heaney himself. Brodsky is aware that poetry suffers neglect in the present; but without confronting this plight head-on, he makes claims for the art form which are larger, it seems, than those made by any other defender in the second half of the twentieth century. His is, one might say, the ultimate utilitarian argument for poetry, and as such it deserves particular attention in Heaney's literary genealogy.

¹³⁹ As in, for example, 'Faith, Hope and Poetry', in which Heaney writes that 'some commentators have all the fussy literalism of an official from the ministry of truth'. (Seamus Heaney, 'Faith, Hope and Poetry', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 219-220.

¹⁴⁰ Joseph Brodsky, *Joseph Brodsky: Conversations*, ed. C. L. Haven, (Mississippi: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), ix.

In the preface to her book on Brodsky, Valentina Polukhina summarises his understanding of the poet's role in society, commenting that 'as far as the social duties of a poet are concerned, his main tasks are: to improve the quality of his language; to inspire in his readers a desire for self-improvement; and to make society less vulgar'.¹⁴¹ While this is an undeniably accurate, if somewhat bland, précis of Brodsky's poetic credo, it is simultaneously a profound understatement of the matter as he sees it. Language, for the Russian poet, is paramount; its importance to Brodsky, particularly as it is embodied in poetry, its 'highest form of existence', cannot be overemphasised.¹⁴² In his view, language is the most powerful social and political force at our disposal, and the poet, as wielder of that force in its ultimate form, is responsible not merely for the linguistic betterment of his or her people, but for their ethical wellbeing; or, rather, the linguistic improvement that he or she engenders is, precisely, to the moral betterment of all. Language misused is, in turn, the cause of social disintegration. Writing about the revolutionary novels of Andrei Platonov, for instance, Brodsky remarks that 'these books never were published in Soviet Russia, for apart from concrete social evil, their real target is the sensibility of language that has brought that evil about'.¹⁴³ The horrors of Soviet Russia, the horrors of the world in general, are in these terms the consequence, ultimately, of malevolent speech, of language turned against humanity by corrupt men and women.

The claim that writers are best suited to defending society against such corruption is, Brodsky believes, a natural one to make. In 'The Sound of the Tide', he writes of Derek Walcott that

he acts out of the belief that language is greater than its masters or its servants, that poetry, being its supreme version, is therefore an instrument of self-betterment for both; i.e., that it is a way to gain an identity superior to the confines of class, race, or ego. This is just plain common sense; this is also the most sound program of social change there is.¹⁴⁴

¹⁴¹ Valentina Polukhina, *Joseph Brodsky: A Poet for Our Time*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), xii.

¹⁴² Joseph Brodsky, 'A Poet and Prose', in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 186.

¹⁴³ Joseph Brodsky, 'Catastrophes in the Air', in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 283.

¹⁴⁴ Joseph Brodsky, 'The Sound of the Tide', in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 170.

One is struck, repeatedly, in reading Brodsky's essays, by statements like the latter: forthright assertions of poetry's social efficacy, uttered with complete confidence, in the tone of one slightly annoyed to find himself in the presence of less certain, somewhat shortsighted people. The implication is that those who do not recognise the intuitive truths which he is concerned to point out are lacking in common sense. However else, Brodsky seems to ask ingenuously, are we going to liberate ourselves from social imprisonment than through language? Literature provides us with both the tools and the standards for political and personal change, and a life lived without literature is, as he writes elsewhere, 'inferior and unworthy of effort' – such effort, would, in any case, come to naught without the poetic dynamo that drives our transformation as human beings.¹⁴⁵

That dynamo – language maximally empowered in poetry – produces in us two kinds of 'psychic movement', both of which are described in Brodsky's long essay on Marina Tsvetaeva, 'Footnote to a Poem'.¹⁴⁶ The first of these is encapsulated in one of his key phrases, which Heaney himself would seem to have borrowed: poetry, through its language, allows us to shift our 'plane of regard', to contemplate our circumstances from a kind of perspective which enables us not only to understand the world in all its complexity (its evil not least), but to comprehend it in the deepest sense of that word.¹⁴⁷ The art form elongates the prospect of human sensibility, raises the level at which our minds operate, and in the process we become immune to the more compromising aspects of whatever reality, social or otherwise, we find ourselves in. It becomes possible for us to see that reality more clearly and thus resist succumbing to it, particularly its chaotic aspects. Poetry thus provides us with a kind of moral, ethical insurance policy; as long as we are reading it, we will be less likely to capitulate to tyrants, bullies or liars of other

¹⁴⁵ Joseph Brodsky, 'Less Than One', in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 28.

¹⁴⁶ Joseph Brodsky, 'Footnote to a Poem', in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 203.

¹⁴⁷ Brodsky, *Less Than One*, 292. The phrase, which Brodsky glosses as one's 'level of mental operation', is prevalent in the other essays in *Less Than One*. See, for example, 'Nadezhda Mandelstam (1899-1980)', 'On "September 1, 1939" by W.H. Auden' and 'To Please a Shadow'. Heaney uses the phrase liberally in essays and articles, and acknowledges it as Brodsky's in at least one instance. (Seamus Heaney, 'Brodsky's Nobel: What the Applause was About', in *The New York Times*, November 8, 1987. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/12/20/specials/heaney-brodsky.html> (January 20, 2009).)

kinds, and neither will we be susceptible to the baser impulses of our own natures. In short, the aesthetic as embodied in the language of great poetry is a kind of guarantor of our existence as ethical beings, and in this way, directly, materially, it affects our way of being in society – and, potentially, society as a whole.

The second psychic movement prompted by poetry, in Brodsky's view, finds a foreshadowing in the work of Robert Frost, one of the Russian's acknowledged influences; Heaney, too, it is worth noting, through his reading of Frost, will incorporate a version of this notion into his defence of poetry.¹⁴⁸ Brodsky's conception is as follows: language, specifically as it is used in poetry, thrusts both poet and reader beyond the expected limitations of their psyche, and shows the reader who has exhausted all possibilities that there exists, through poetry, a range of further options. (In Brodsky's view, as expressed more than once in *Less Than One*, reality is essentially wanting – he describes it, in its Soviet embodiment, as 'either nonsense or nuisance' – and we must turn to literature for a fuller and by definition superior existence.) Such is the inherent drive of language, its irresistible momentum, that, in its highest form, poetry, it carries our minds, our beings, into 'infinity' itself, as Brodsky states with reference to Dostoevsky. To put it more prosaically, we are flung so far beyond the limits of our daily understanding that we glimpse the outer reaches of our own humanity, and the machinery of the world at large.¹⁴⁹ Our plane of regard is raised; our lives, our dilemmas, are clarified.

The poet, too, experiences a version of this motion, because the very process of creation is one driven by language, which is synonymous, for Brodsky, with the Muse. It is language that 'prompts, or ... dictates' each new line of poetry, and the experience of writing is an experience of immersion in language, being engulfed and propelled along by it.¹⁵⁰ Poetry is, ideally, 'language negating its own mass and the laws of gravity ... language's own striving upward – or sideways – to that beginning where the Word was', taking poet and reader with it.¹⁵¹ The poet, becoming an instrument of the language, of the Muse, becomes secondary to it, rather than vice versa, and, as Brodsky has it, the

¹⁴⁸ Joseph Brodsky, interview by Sven Birkerts, *Paris Review* 24 (1982): 89.

¹⁴⁹ Brodsky, *Less Than One*, 28, 278.

¹⁵⁰ Joseph Brodsky, 'Uncommon Visage: The Nobel Lecture', in *On Grief and Reason: Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995), 57.

¹⁵¹ Brodsky, *Less Than One*, 186.

language uses him or her to sustain itself, to prolong its existence.¹⁵² For the Russian poet, as Stephen Watson points out,

language is worthy of all homage because it is the very medium itself, the limitless possibilities bedded in the nature of syntax and vocabulary, that carry the writer, and specifically the poet, into dimensions where he or she would otherwise not be able to travel.¹⁵³

Furthermore, the moral ramifications of a poem are directly related to the degree to which the poet proves a worthy tool of the language. Brodsky claims in his essay on Auden that the better a writer's ear, the more acute his ethical sensibility (by this token, of course, Heaney is the most exceptionally moral of men).¹⁵⁴

In some of Brodsky's formulations of this idea of linguistic momentum, he prefigures the kind of assertion that Heaney will make a few years later – at one point, for example, the Russian writes that poetic language is 'the liberated verse-mass milling the theme and almost literally splashing up when it hits a rhyme or an image', displaying a strikingly Heaneyesque turn of phrase. Elsewhere, he demonstrates how the process of rhyme in poetry serves as a means of resurrecting, in a sense, the dead – it pushes beyond the boundaries of the actual and brings something back, accomplishing what we might call 'symbolic repair'.¹⁵⁵ Heaney, likewise, has faith that, as one writer has put it,

in every achieved poem, an absence is evoked in such a way that, even should that absence be terminal (i.e. a loss irrecoverable, an injustice irreparable), it becomes, in the poem itself, a living presence, an absence transformed.¹⁵⁶

Moreover, it is, in 1996, Brodsky's conviction that poetry can overtake reality which Heaney celebrates in his *New York Times* obituary for the Russian poet, who revered

¹⁵² Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason*, 56.

¹⁵³ Stephen Watson, 'Two Writers from the Other Europe: Zbigniew Herbert and Joseph Brodsky', in *Selected Essays 1980-1990*, (Cape Town: Carrefour Press, 1990), 117.

¹⁵⁴ Joseph Brodsky, 'On 'September 1, 1939' by W.H. Auden', in *Less Than One: Selected Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1986), 347.

¹⁵⁵ Brodsky, *Less Than One*, 259, 265.

¹⁵⁶ Stephen Watson, 'Poetry and Absence: One Writer's Account', in *Evocations of Absence: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Void States*, ed. P.W. Ashton, (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2007), 20.

above all ‘the capacity of language to go farther and faster than expected, and thereby provide an escape from the limitations and the preoccupations of the self’.¹⁵⁷

It is telling, however, that Heaney should phrase his tribute thus, focusing on the power of language to liberate us from our internal constraints, and not, primarily, from the oppressive social forces at work in our lives (and there is a difference between these two, not least in Brodsky’s own work). Brodsky’s version of the utilitarian argument is, as I have suggested, the most literal and extreme form of it propagated in the work of any twentieth-century writer. While there are echoes of other utilitarian defenders in his work – Eliot’s requirement that poets preserve and improve the language, for example – the degree to which he worships language is unparalleled. He believes, in his own words, in ‘the complete overlapping of art and ethics’, and he attributes to poetry, to language, a spiritual, moral force that is, in short, the greatest such force in existence. Nothing – no other god, no human effort, no natural phenomenon – is more responsible for the character of our suffering and for our relief from that suffering. The battle line at Armageddon has been drawn, and it is a margin.

The weakness of this argument, though, is nowhere clearer than in the form it takes in Brodsky’s 1987 Nobel Lecture, in which, with perhaps self-conscious hedging, he states

I’ll just say that I believe – not empirically, alas, but only theoretically – that for someone who has read a lot of Dickens, to shoot his like in the name of some idea is somewhat more problematic than for someone who has read no Dickens.¹⁵⁸

In other words, a society whose members are well-read is less likely to commit atrocities, whether at the directive of their government or otherwise. The man or woman who has read *Oliver Twist*, *Great Expectations* and *David Copperfield* will more immediately, more determinedly reject the thought or suggestion of violence and wrongdoing than the man or woman who has not. In short, the well-read are more moral than the illiterate. This is a fundamentally offensive notion, particularly viewed from any context in which historical social disadvantage – for reasons of race, class or gender – has equated to

¹⁵⁷ Seamus Heaney, ‘Joseph Brodsky 1940-1996’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 403.

¹⁵⁸ Brodsky, *On Grief and Reason*, 53.

educational disadvantage. It is not, however, simply an absence of political correctness that makes Brodsky's suggestion problematic. His parenthetical remark that, alas, there is no actual evidence for his claim, is perhaps more to the point.

High culture – as Heaney himself remarks – has never precluded base activity, and there is evidence aplenty, not least from the Nazi period, that a taste for poetry does not preclude a taste for cruelty.¹⁵⁹ Poetry, for Heaney, has a cleansing, corrective effect in the socio-political arena; but he insists, unlike Brodsky – indeed, contrary to him – that poetry's task is not to enact political or social goals.¹⁶⁰ 'Poetry may lead on to action', Les Murray concurs, 'but it is equally likely not to, because in a way it *is* the action'.¹⁶¹ John Carey, in *What Good Are The Arts?*, dismisses views like Brodsky's as deeply illogical. Disputing the notion that literature either affects us morally or allows us to empathise productively with others – both of which would in turn make us aware of the unhealthy elements in society from which we need protection – Carey writes that 'it is self-serving and crassly unimaginative' to assume that reading about the difficulties or errors of others can allow us to modify our own behaviour in accordance with theirs:

to believe that, from reading books, you know what it really feels like to starve, to be in continual pain, to watch your children die – in short, to subsist in the Third World – is not a refinement of sensibility but a trivialisation of others' suffering.¹⁶²

According to Carey, the belief that such empathy is possible through literature is a consequence of a powerful desire among those who love the art form that it be so; in short, such people delude themselves into thinking there is some benefit of increased compassion and understanding possible through reading.

¹⁵⁹ Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 69. Given Heaney's use of Simone Weil elsewhere in his essays (see Chapter 4), it is instructive to note that Weil, albeit well before Heaney's time, tried to explain this lack of equivalence between aesthetic sophistication and moral fineness by distinguishing between divine and demoniacal art. 'If the beautiful is the real presence of God in matter and if contact with the beautiful is a sacrament in the full sense of the word, how is it that there are so many perverted aesthetes? Nero. Is it like the hunger of those who frequent black masses for the consecrated hosts? Or is it, more probably, because these people do not devote themselves to what is genuinely beautiful, but to a bad imitation? For, just as there is an art which is divine, so there is one which is demoniacal. It was no doubt the latter that Nero loved. A great deal of our art is of the devil'. (Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, 1952), 138.)

¹⁶⁰ Heaney, *Government*, 107-108.

¹⁶¹ Murray, 348.

¹⁶² John Carey, *What Good Are The Arts?*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2005), 108-109.

While I find Brodsky's argument in this regard excessive, Carey's dismissal of such claims is itself a somewhat unimaginative, and indeed crass, way of putting the matter. The weight of historical belief that literature affects us morally and in our capacity to live as human beings is evidenced by, not least, the censoring of literature, time and time again, in both totalitarian and democratic societies.¹⁶³ Brodsky may be overreaching in his suggestion that the problems of Soviet Russia are, at root, problems of language, but his comment on the matter reminds us that the state felt sufficiently threatened by Andrei Platonov's novels to ban his work. Literature, in the eyes of such governments, is a source of (unwelcome) ideas before it is language or sound or rhythm, and Carey – as well as Brodsky – seems to forget this in his argument. Whether in the crude form of a manifesto, the conspicuous form of a philosophical text or the less obvious form of a novel or anthology of poems, writing is the foremost means by which ideas and sentiments – of whatever nature – are disseminated. And indeed, there has long been the assumption (even if absolute proof is impossible to obtain) that in depicting the sufferings of others, literature is uniquely equipped to enlarge the range of sympathy within the reader – ironically, this is what Auden meant when he wrote 'in the deserts of the heart / let the healing fountain start' – and thereby at least instil in human beings a predisposition towards the needs of strangers, whether we act on that inclination or not.¹⁶⁴ In his highly acclaimed essay on those needs, Michael Ignatieff asserts that 'it is the painters and writers, not the politicians or social scientists, who have been able to find a language for the joy of [contemporary] life'; they are also, according to Ignatieff, the people to whom we must look for a full and adequate expression of our contemporary needs.¹⁶⁵ Such expression would, surely, be purposeless if it did not enable us to understand each other better, to better imagine the plight of others.

In the word 'imagine' lies the primary distinction between Brodsky and Heaney. Brodsky would not – and indeed does not – happily limit, as he would interpret it, poetry's political and social efficacy to its operations on our imagination. The latter term is pivotal to Heaney's defence: it is through the imagination that poetry changes us, and,

¹⁶³ Witness, for instance, the laws that gave rise to the obscenity trial of the publishing house who first printed *Lady Chatterley's Lover* in the United Kingdom. (Allan Sinfield, *Society and Literature 1945-1970*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 1983), 52-53.)

¹⁶⁴ Auden, *Collected Poems*, 248.

¹⁶⁵ Michael Ignatieff, *The Needs of Strangers*, (London: The Hogarth Press, 1990), 17.

ultimately, society. A poem's first work, as it were, is on the imagination, and that imagination is also the pre-linguistic impetus behind a poem. For Brodsky, the process is more direct and more comprehensive: language, which is inspiration itself, engenders change, and does so – or can do so – to devastating, real effect. The notion of a 'pre-linguistic' impulse of any kind does not exist in his worldview. What this argument amounts to is a kind of linguistic mysticism, a sweeping intellectual gesture with which Brodsky wipes the human slate clean of God and every other kind of non-linguistic influence on our lives.

At almost every important point in the essays in *Less Than One*, it is language, and nothing but language, that emerges as the true hero or heroine, as well as the chief means to whatever form of salvation Brodsky is able to envisage. Language is everywhere prior, and to such a degree that there are times in his work when linguistics, as Jonathan Schell has remarked, 'seems to have swallowed up theology'.¹⁶⁶

It is refreshing to have broadly stated, as Brodsky is bold to do, that poetry is the supreme use of language by the human species, and that, therefore, indifference to poetry is an anthropological crime. It casts an interesting light on the creative process, as it is embodied in poems, to know that they make use of a dynamics in language, unavailable to prose writers, that propels the poet in the direction of 'truths' at which, unaided (that is to say without language), he or she would never be able to arrive. These are the kinds of revealing insights that Brodsky's essays throw up, albeit in his often highly unsystematic way. But, to the Western reader, he might seem to place a little too much confidence in the culture of belief – and it is a specifically Russian one – that the poet is not only a kind of alternative government, but, above all, a moral authority, and his or her work morally improving as a result. The twentieth century is replete, as I have pointed out, with examples which have made us sceptical of that ethical-aesthetic dyad which is at the heart of Brodsky's defence, and, finally, we are more taken aback than taken in by his passionate conviction in the omnipotence of language.

¹⁶⁶ Watson, *Selected Essays*, 117.

VIII

In his 2004 eulogy to the Polish poet and essayist Czeslaw Milosz in *The Guardian*, Heaney refers to the Nobel Laureate as ‘a credible witness to [an] immemorial belief in the saving power of poetry’.¹⁶⁷ As regards this poet, Heaney insists, it is his faith that is of the essence:

there was nothing disingenuous about his professions of faith in poetry, which he once called philosophy's ‘ally in the service of the good’, news that ‘was brought to the mountains by a unicorn and an echo’. Such trust in the delicious joy-bringing potential of art and intellect was protected by strong bulwarks built from the knowledge and experience that he had gained at first hand and at great cost.¹⁶⁸

That knowledge and experience, gained in Warsaw during and after World War II, make Milosz a definitive poet-witness, his poetry born of an all-too-personal encounter with calamity.¹⁶⁹ Heaney is drawn to Milosz for the very reason that the Polish writer is of especial interest to us here: placed unwittingly at the very epicentre of European history at its twentieth-century nadir, he encountered firsthand some of the forces which have been most malignantly opposed to poetry, and indeed civilisation. His identification of the antagonists most threatening to poetry and his response to those foes therefore carry especial weight. Milosz’s defence of poetry is not of one piece; there is no single greatest challenge to poetry in his conception, but rather a range of enemies, and the culmination of his response to those enemies is, as we will see, based on a kind of prophetic mysticism which bewilders, rather than reassures the reader.

Milosz’s *The Witness of Poetry*, a series of lectures delivered at Harvard in 1981 and 1982, is the book that most decisively delineates the forces with which the writer believes poetry has had to do battle in the twentieth century. The recurring question that underlies each of these lectures on poetry is why, at this historical moment, the art form is characterised by ‘every kind of pessimism, sarcasm, bitterness, doubt’; why the capacity

¹⁶⁷ Seamus Heaney, ‘In Gratitude for All the Gifts: Czeslaw Milosz 1911-2004’. *The Guardian*, September 11, 2004. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2004/sep/11/featuresreviews.guardianreview25> (December 12, 2008).

¹⁶⁸ Heaney, ‘In Gratitude’.

¹⁶⁹ Cynthia L. Haven, ‘Introduction’, in *Czeslaw Milosz: Conversations*, ed. C.L. Haven, (Mississippi: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), xi.

to respond to the world with joy and hope seems to be lacking in contemporary poets.¹⁷⁰ Milosz's answer is manifold. Already, by the end of the opening sentence of the book, he has identified two of poetry's current challengers, namely the age of criticism and the predominance of scientific thought and discourse.¹⁷¹ His insistence, throughout these lectures, will be that poetry is embittered and without hope because it constitutes the most authentic 'witness' to society and humanity: it is, in a postmodern age as never before, the single most consistently insightful measure of the world's wellbeing, and its current cynicism apprises us of the degree to which that wellbeing is under threat from a variety of sources.¹⁷²

The first of these, as identified by Milosz, concerns the alienation of poetry and poets from the rest of society, resulting in 'the schism and the misunderstanding between the poet and the great human family'.¹⁷³ This process of divorce began in the nineteenth century, but, by the twentieth, had become a basic fact of the poet's existence. Poetry, through its language, has the potential to exert influence socially, politically and spiritually. As those concerns are increasingly excluded from poetry, however, and as it becomes more and more an art form speaking to an isolated elite, poetry itself exacerbates the divide between that elite and the rest of society. When that divide is radically, traumatically closed by a shared catastrophe – such as Germany's occupation of Poland – poetry once more becomes 'as essential as bread', as it was in a bygone era; it once more, inevitably, becomes deeply involved in society and its most immediate needs. But such cataclysmic events are of course neither desirable nor, thankfully, regularly forthcoming. The bleakness of contemporary poetry, Milosz concludes the lecture by suggesting, might be in part explained by this distance between the art form and its erstwhile audience.¹⁷⁴ This is a version of the argument presented more recently by writers like Epstein and Gioia; and it is foreshadowed in the complaint that Modernist poetry is too difficult for, and too estranged from the common reader.

¹⁷⁰ Czeslaw Milosz, 'Starting from My Europe', in *The Witness of Poetry: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983), 14.

¹⁷¹ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 3.

¹⁷² Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 4, 11, 16.

¹⁷³ Oscar Milosz qtd in Czeslaw Milosz, 'Poets and the Human Family', in *The Witness of Poetry: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983), 28.

¹⁷⁴ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 25, 31, 37.

Milosz follows this lecture with one entitled 'The Lesson of Biology', identifying another recurrent enemy of poetry, science. His perspective on the nature of this enemy takes a slightly different form, however, to those of his predecessors. For Milosz, the scientific foe is an insidious one, whose most damaging effects take place within the imagination of the poet him or herself: education, with its emphasis on scientific modes of thought and evaluation, not only dispose the poet to view the world in the limited, preconceived manner espoused by such ways of thinking, but induce shame in the writer who would do otherwise, who would present to the reader a wholly original, childlike understanding of the earth.¹⁷⁵ The threat to poetry inherent in this state of affairs is, at root, a threat to Blake's 'Divine Imagination'. Without that imagination, that spiritual lens on the world, the poet's perspective is 'cold, indifferent' and disaffectedly objective – in a word, disenchanted.¹⁷⁶ (And without that enchantment – such is Milosz's contention – the poet and his or her work will be a diminished thing.)

Milosz likens the twentieth-century effects of science on the human mind to the more visible, quantifiable effects on the earth itself of pollution, and the by-products of the development made possible by science. In a world in which the human being is no longer regarded as a 'mystery' – that is, his or her irreducible individuality underwritten by God – he or she becomes but one of a million species fighting for dominance. The imagination, in such a world, is constrained to an unbearable degree by 'the scientific Weltanschauung, according to which only the chain of causes and effects is responsible'. When this worldview is translated into the social domain, its effects are reductionist and devastating, to an extent as yet unknown to us; among those effects, however, is the Darwinian notion of the 'the survival of the fittest', which, in crude or otherwise debased forms, has been the justification for destroying countless lives as a means to cleanse society of unwanted elements.¹⁷⁷

As a result of this, the poet, whose imagination longs, according to Milosz, to be able to rest on the certainty, the subjectivity of God, is a creature in limbo. Poetry, as the Polish writer sees it, has always been a matter of clear judgement, of good and evil, of beauty and ugliness, of truth and lies. Now, under the reign of science and its obliteration

¹⁷⁵ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 41-43.

¹⁷⁶ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 47.

¹⁷⁷ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 50.

of such absolute opposites, the art form finds itself in a quandary; the despair evident in so much twentieth-century poetry is a consequence, whether acknowledged or not, of precisely this. Fifteen years later, in the introduction to his *A Book of Luminous Things*, Milosz re-emphasises the dangers of this imaginative poverty in our time.

It has happened that we have been afflicted with a basic *deprivation* ... Theology, science, philosophy, though they attempt to provide cures, are not very effective 'in that dark world where gods have lost their way' ... The world deprived of clear-cut outlines, of the up and the down, of good and evil, succumbs to a peculiar nihilisation, that is, it loses its colours, so that greyness covers not only things of this earth and of space, but also the very flow of time ...¹⁷⁸

The fatalism induced by this position is acknowledged and very slightly relieved by Milosz in the closing paragraphs of 'The Lesson in Biology', where he is at pains to reassure the reader that science is, in his view, neither an altogether detrimental force nor an insurmountable one for writers. Additional scientific progress is needed to undo the environmental damage wrought by its technological application, and poets will continue to engage in what Milosz famously calls 'the passionate pursuit of the Real'; they will continue, in other words, to examine reality as they always have, to gaze upon its intricacy and enormity, hoping to find within it an epiphany of its most essential nature, 'the Real'. Poets, Milosz suggests, have at heart an immovable faith in reality (or at least, in his terms, ought to).

That quest by poets to pursue and capture reality as precisely, as concretely as possible, is compromised, however, as Milosz argues in 'A Quarrel with Classicism', by the modern poet's inheritance of traditional form and convention. This lecture is, of those in *The Witness of Poetry*, the least immediately relevant to a discussion of Milosz's defence of poetry. It is, however, instructive as to his conception of poetry's relationship to the 'Real'. The inheritance of classicism, his argument goes, stands as a constant invitation for the writer to sacrifice realism, and the 'logic of incessant *movement*' that governs the arts, for the static, but superficially elegant linguistic and formal constructs central to the centuries-old habits of European poets. Language, in terms of that invitation, is inherently inadequate as a frame for the actual, and thus, paradoxically, the

¹⁷⁸ Czeslaw Milosz, 'Introduction', in *A Book of Luminous Things: An International Anthology of Poetry*, (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1998, xvi.

hackneyed conventions available to us are the closest we can come to representing reality in a meaningful way; the very familiarity of those codes to the reader renders them most appropriate to the task.¹⁷⁹ The province of poetry outside the borders of those conventions is a perilous, uncertain place; but, Milosz argues, it is in fact that uncertainty that ensures, in the bravest poets, a continued and determined ‘pursuit of the Real’.¹⁸⁰

There is a kind of Platonism in Milosz which seems to lead him to believe that there is an essence to things which is not immediately available to us and which, with sufficient faith and not least sufficient talent, the poet, through the medium of words, can approach and even capture. In holding such faith, Milosz follows the ‘principle of individuation’ found in the work of the thirteenth-century Franciscan philosopher Duns Scotus, whose influence Michael Parker traces to the poetry of Heaney, too:¹⁸¹

all medieval philosophers were concerned with how human beings could come to know the universal; Scotus believed that they could do so by apprehending an individual object’s essence, which he named its ‘this-ness’ (*haecceitas*); and that such apprehensions and intuitions ultimately reveal God ...¹⁸²

Even if the matter of language itself, through its very referential quality, ensures that the writer can never perhaps apprehend the object in all its quiddity, it is a necessary goad to all his or her activities, Milosz argues, that he or she believe that ‘this wild swan of a world’ – a phrase that he borrows from an American poet he admires, Robinson Jeffers – can be hunted down. It is an awareness of this that, however frustrating it might be, quite literally keeps the poet to the mark and, in Milosz’s terms, ensures the health of the art form itself. Whatever the time, whatever the place, whatever the social constraints, the Real remains, whether realised or not, whether apprehended by the poet or not.

Heaney, in an essay on Miroslav Holub, encapsulates Milosz’s argument with classicism thus:

classicism, in this definition, becomes a negative aspect of the Horatian *dulce*, a matter of conventional ornament, a protective paradigm of the way things are,

¹⁷⁹ Czeslaw Milosz, ‘A Quarrel with Classicism’, in *The Witness of Poetry: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983), 62-65.

¹⁸⁰ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 66.

¹⁸¹ Parker, 19.

¹⁸² Graham Storey, qtd in Parker, 19.

drawn from previous readings of the world which remain impervious to new perceptions and which are therefore deleterious to the growth of consciousness.¹⁸³

Twentieth-century poets, Milosz goes on to assert, despite being freer than ever before to abandon the strictures of traditional expression and to set off in pursuit of the Real, appear to be no more immune to the temptations of form than their predecessors: 'a glass wall of conventions rises between a poet and reality', and Milosz wonders whether the dejection that so preoccupies him in contemporary writing is perhaps not merely a poetic 'tic' of the age. The poet has, in any case, found him or herself caught between a commitment to reality, and one to poetic custom. The history of poetry itself, its inherited forms and conventions, in this way becomes a threat to that which Milosz regards as its most central occupation – the perception of the Real.¹⁸⁴

Far weightier obligations are called into question in the penultimate essay in *The Witness of Poetry*, 'Ruins and Poetry', in which Milosz faces, as he inevitably must given his background, the political accusation against poetry. The context which gives shape to that accusation as well as his response to it is his own Poland, specifically during World War II, where the Nazi occupation, resulting in the obliteration of the social order and the very idea of civilisation itself, led to a radical disenchantment which included the notion of culture as well:

the main reproach made to culture, a reproach at first too difficult to be formulated, then finally formulated, was that it maintained a network of meanings and symbols as a façade to hide the genocide under way. By the same token, religion, philosophy, and art became suspect as accomplices in deceiving man with lofty ideas, in order to veil the truth of existence. Only the biological seemed true ...¹⁸⁵

In this manner, the culture, not least as it is represented in poetry, bears the burden of a society's helpless rage, becoming but another source of betrayal and treachery, complicit in the full horror of what has come to pass. Milosz does not hesitate to acknowledge that, in the light of a ghastly reality, the institution of literature itself becomes culpable. There

¹⁸³ Seamus Heaney, 'The Fully Exposed Poem', in *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 52.

¹⁸⁴ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 70-71.

¹⁸⁵ Czesław Milosz, 'Ruins and Poetry', in *The Witness of Poetry: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983), 81.

is, he argues, nonetheless an admirable quality to poems that attempt to document, to witness, in every painful detail, the facts of those horrors. Such poetry is constructed, as it were, from the ruins of a nation and an era, from the ruins of language itself.¹⁸⁶ That this effort is at all possible, Milosz claims, answers Adorno's much-quoted challenge as to the possibility of writing poetry after the Holocaust, and in doing so it becomes the embodiment, however fragmented, however fragile, of hope. Such hope originates, more often than not, as he goes on to assert in some of his other writing, in a revelation of the Real; and so attention to that profound reality, in the form of poetry, is vitally necessary in a world characterised by political upheaval.

The Polish writer is, crucially, able to make this argument for hope because of his belief in that essential, transcendent Real which is beyond the inherently superficial reality established by linguistic signs. The Nazis may, as Adorno argued in his writing on Auschwitz, have exterminated semantics itself along with millions of lives, destroyed irredeemably our ability to conceive of life and death in traditional terms; but Milosz's Real is not dependent on the authority of language for its existence.¹⁸⁷ Poetic language simply provides the means by which the Real might be shown forth, and thus Milosz defends, as Heaney also does (albeit on different grounds), 'the need for beauty and poetry in the face of destruction' – the need, in other words, for an alertness to and an expression of the Real. For Milosz, as Nathan and Quinn have stated, the 'transcendence' of nightmarish reality is possible only through 'immanence', through ever closer attention to the natural world, the world fundamentally uncompromised by the corruption of language and culture.¹⁸⁸ This claim is, as Heaney points out again, authenticated by Milosz's personal experience. 'The poetry I wrote before the war, and later in Nazi-occupied Poland,' Milosz writes, 'would have been utterly without hope were it not for my awareness of the beauty of the things of this earth'.¹⁸⁹ That beauty, by its survival

¹⁸⁶ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 83-84.

¹⁸⁷ J.M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 382-383.

¹⁸⁸ Bogdana Carpenter and Madeline G. Levine, 'Introduction', in C. Milosz, *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), xiii; Leonard Nathan and Arthur Quinn, *The Poet's Work: An Introduction to Czeslaw Milosz*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), 54.

¹⁸⁹ Czeslaw Milosz, *To Begin Where I Am: Selected Essays*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 356.

even as the foundations of civilisation give way, presents an alternative to the despair of political and social monstrosities; and writing that captures that alternative, finding its source in what is most unquestionably Real, is, it seems, the only worthy heritage the poet can hope to leave. Nathan and Quinn put it as follows:

human beings are so much brushwood in the cosmic scheme of things; we come to be and pass away in a moment. Yet in the conflagrations that reduce us to charred cinders, as we pass into nothingness, we can still struggle to give off some light, which is our only way to affirm the value of the very process that consumes us. This glowing ember of human suffering is called poetry. As Milosz later put it, 'Man perishes entire and leaves no trace except a spark of beauty, provided he can trap it'.¹⁹⁰

And so the enemies of poetry jostle for front row in *The Witness of Poetry*: modern alienation between poet and reader; the threat that science represents to the imagination and its 'innocence'; the necessity yet futility of the various aesthetic modes of capturing the Real; the unavoidable political accusation; and, at least in brief, the overabundance of critical writing on poetry that has had a tendency to claim ascendancy over the art form whose servant it once was. Milosz does an accomplished job of presenting the challenges facing twentieth- (and twenty-first-) century poets, and his articulation of the dilemmas of the poet, particularly vis à vis politics, is easily the equal of Heaney's – as, given his historical experience, one might well expect it to be. In his response to those challenges, however, particularly as expressed in the final essay in the collection, 'On Hope', Milosz is less than entirely lucid. His final expression of the future of poetry is a statement of faith which, if one does not share his Roman Catholicism or mystical leanings, it is very difficult to find persuasive, and, indeed, to interpret at all.¹⁹¹

The final statement of 'On Hope' is a summary expression of that faith. Having predicted, in the rest of the essay, a series of great and potentially positive changes taking place the world over, Milosz concludes by proclaiming that

every day one can see signs indicating that now, at the present moment, something new, and on a scale never witnessed before, is being born: humanity as

¹⁹⁰ Nathan and Quinn, 10.

¹⁹¹ In his other writings, especially *The Land of Ulro*, Milosz makes much of his appreciation of Emanuel Swedenborg, and his own cousin, the French writer Oscar Milosz. (Czesław Milosz, *The Land of Ulro*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2000).)

an elemental force conscious of transcending Nature, for it lives by memory of itself, that is, in History.¹⁹²

The Polish writer senses what he calls elsewhere in the essay the impending ‘unification of our planet’.¹⁹³ The means to that unification, or to a desirable form of it, lie in history, and in a growing consciousness, as he has it, of our planet’s past. History will, Milosz predicts, replace science as the lens through which we scrutinise ourselves and our society, and we will thus gain a greater understanding of our own humanity; part of that process will be the ‘search for reality purified ... for beauty’. The ultimate consequence of this global change will be healing – of the divide between poetry and society, of the gap between what we wish for and what we suffer. There remains, however, as Milosz states elsewhere in the essay, a risk that the world will veer towards disintegration rather than unification. It is an awareness of this risk that, in this final essay, is responsible for the characteristic bleakness of twentieth-century poetry, a cast of mind that fails to take into account the hope of which Milosz himself is so profoundly aware.¹⁹⁴

Summarised in this fashion, Milosz’s arguments seem not far removed from the platitudinous. Like Brodsky’s, Milosz’s thought here becomes vapid with a kind of hope which the reader is very hard-pressed to find real or to see as anything other than a peculiarity of his own mind and its eschatological leanings. Something of what he seems to be driving at is suggested years earlier when, for instance, he writes in *The Captive Mind*,

today the only poetry worthy of the name is eschatological, that is, poetry which rejects the present and human world in the name of a great change. The reader of today is in search of hope, and he does not care for poetry which accepts the order of things as permanent.¹⁹⁵

Yes, the reader might say, but we are best persuaded by works, and not statements of faith, particularly when it comes to the value and viability of an art form. How Milosz reaches his extraordinary and puzzling conclusion to *The Witness of Poetry* remains

¹⁹² Czeslaw Milosz, ‘On Hope’, in *The Witness of Poetry: The Charles Eliot Norton Lectures*, (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1983), 116.

¹⁹³ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 104.

¹⁹⁴ Milosz, *The Witness of Poetry*, 110, 115, 116.

¹⁹⁵ Czeslaw Milosz, *The Captive Mind*, (New York: Vintage, 1990), 237.

unclear; it is also frustrating, after the careful and expertly argued essays preceding this one, to come up against a wall of mysticism and unfathomable hope. There is doubtless something attractive about the confidence and unwavering belief expressed by Milosz in this closing essay, but as much as the emotional force behind these convictions communicates itself to us, the motivation for them does not. The reader, ultimately, is left in the dark.

All of the foregoing might seem of no relevance to this thesis. But my exposition of the final tendency of Milosz's ideas is made principally for reasons of contrast. There is a crucial point of departure between Milosz's defence and Heaney's, even when they might seem to be on common ground: where the latter founds his argument on demonstration, on the engaging and acutely sensitive reading of exemplary poems, Milosz is simply not as good a reader, and neither is he so meticulous in the provision of such evidence. He has a tendency to levitate, as it were, precisely where Heaney, perhaps faithful to his all too earthy origins, is inclined to dig – which is why one could never, pejoratively, call the Irish writer mystical. It is to Heaney's defence, therefore, which we must turn for a response, whether implicit or explicit, to the kinds of objections to poetry raised by Milosz; and an answer, above all, to what I have called the political accusation against the art form.

Chapter 2

Heaney's Defence of Poetry I: The Processes of Poetry

In the case of the pen 'between my finger and thumb', 'snug as a gun', and all the rest of it, I was responding to an entirely phonetic prompt, a kind of sonic chain dictated by the inner ear. It's the connection between the 'uh' sounds in 'thumb' and 'snug' and 'gun' that are the heart of the poetic matter rather than any sociological or literary formation.

Seamus Heaney on writing 'Digging', interview with Dennis O'Driscoll¹

I

The canniness of Seamus Heaney's defence of poetry, the strategic subtlety of it, is that, while acutely aware of the enemies ranged against the art form, he does not try to attack politics, science, religion, mass society, technology or any of the other perceived enemies of poetry head-on. His defence, in its essence, is not concerned with destroying poetry's foes; he is not anti-science or anti-religion or even anti-politics. He has – and this is conspicuous throughout his career – a prior commitment, which is to poetry. And for him, poetry, while never without its political implications, is not politics by other means; it is not religion by other means (though its relation to religion is never denied); it is not sociology by other means. It is its own, autonomous self; it is poetry. He takes it as a kind of first commandment, in short, that poetry is poetry and not some other thing (as F.R. Leavis claimed, though Heaney is himself no Leavisite); his faith in the art form is not underwritten by anything but his own understanding of the nature of that art form itself. Indeed, his conception of poetry's internal processes forms the substructure of his defence, the grounds on which he establishes poetry's adequacy, its efficacy, to withstand the socio-political pressures of the contemporary world. It is those processes, as depicted by Heaney in his essays, which will be my focus in this chapter.

One of the strengths of those essays – indeed, of Heaney's argument as a whole – is that he is perhaps rare among writers in that the fundamental elements of his defence are consistent throughout his career; notwithstanding his conception, remarked by Vendler in the Introduction to this thesis, of increasingly insightful, compelling metaphors for those concerns. Heaney's stance towards poetry has remained essentially

¹ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 82-83.

unchanged. His focus has shifted, certainly – his 1995 prose collection, *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, turns from the political charge which dominates his earlier work to the burden imposed by reality itself – and his ideas become more sharply defined over the decades; but Heaney has worked for thirty years within the same conceptual framework. He does not rely on modish theoretical trappings at any stage of his argument; as Hazard Adams points out, ‘there is very little reference to recent critical and theoretical discourse familiar to American academics in Heaney’s essays ... and almost no use of its jargon’.² His is not an approach based on current trends, which might well have dated it many times over by this stage. The shift in perspective that does take place within his work is analogous to one he describes as taking place in the work of every poet, from an inward, personal concentration – in Heaney’s case on his relationship to the political and social turmoil of Northern Ireland – to a focus ‘beyond himself’, which ‘take[s] on the otherness of the world’ – or, in Heaney’s case, a broader exploration of the imagination and its reach in a post-religious age.³ In researching his defence, I have been struck by the frequency, over time, with which he returns to the same writers, the same passages, linchpins of an attitude to art and life held with absolute consistency for all of his career thus far. Indeed, I have found it unavoidable, at times in my exegesis, to follow in his footsteps, exploring the number of ways and different junctures at which, for example, he uses a writer like Osip Mandelstam or Robert Frost. Neil Corcoran comments on this same aspect of Heaney’s work, suggesting that such passages, such writers, ‘act almost as Arnoldian touchstones of memorable authority’, which furnish ‘the basis for the sometimes intense physicality of Heaney’s own creatively oriented criticism’.⁴

Undoubtedly, the potency of Heaney’s defence has much to do with his critical style: ‘the Heaney manner’ is crucial to the success of his argument. In his essays, he is the quintessential man of letters, as described by John Gross in *The Oxford Book of Essays*, whose manner of writing is notable, particularly in his prose, for its ‘intimacy and informality’; he is, at the same time, an accomplished rhetorician, albeit in a non-

² Hazard Adams, *The Offense of Poetry*, (Washington: University of Washington Press, 2007), 217.

³ Seamus Heaney, ‘The Murmur of Malvern’, in *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 23.

⁴ Corcoran, 225.

pejorative sense.⁵ He adopts the middle register, one which is averse to the dry intricacies of literary theory. If Heaney has a reader over his shoulder, then he or she is that (perhaps now mythical) figure, the educated and interested general reader; it is with him or her in mind that he always writes. In particular, poetry as represented by him is not the private domain of an elite or coterie: in his criticism there is no trace of condescension towards what Ezra Pound once called ‘the bullet-headed many’.⁶ Brad Leithauser has said of Randall Jarrell that ‘the reader connects with [his] criticism immediately, emotionally’, and this is true of Heaney too. He is, like Jarrell, able to communicate and inspire great strength of feeling in his reader. In the same vein, Anne Stevenson has written that Heaney’s ‘poetry and prose are branches of the same tree’; we respond to his essays as we do his poems, ‘as distinctive perceptions of a humane intelligence and eminently generous personality’.⁷ As much as his poems clarify life, his prose clarifies poetry as an art form – its purposes, its processes, and its undeniable place in the world.

Heaney is a superb expositor, a practical critic sharing many of the same skills as Jarrell. The two writers likewise share an attractive temperament (and the luck of that temperament), but, despite the readiness of his enthusiasms, the American finally does not quite have Heaney’s powers of articulation. The persuasive power of the latter’s rhetoric lies firstly in the fact that it never has designs upon us. Heaney almost never arouses the suspicion that he has an axe to grind. His writing is at the furthest remove from emotional blackmail, and his argument is fundamentally non-ideological, a rare achievement in an age in which political-ideological considerations have a way of insinuating themselves into all spheres of human activity. Above all, however, his persuasive power rests in an uncanny ability to render in language, whether through an aptly chosen analogy or the grace of a metaphor, that which we recognise – intuitively, pre-linguistically – as true. Heaney is able to ‘listen in’ to a poet or a poem as if his own ear were possessed of super-aural properties, convincing us without special pleading, and in the easy elegance of his prose style, that there are depths present in that which he is ‘sounding’ which we never expected were there. Poetry, as a result, becomes an art form, a vessel, more replete with meaning (in the widest sense), more indispensable, than ever

⁵ John Gross, ‘Introduction’, in *The Oxford Book of Essays*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), xix.

⁶ Pound, *The ABC of Reading*, 81.

⁷ Stevenson, 131-132.

before. Without this superb critical capacity, as well as the matching skills of articulation, his defence, while always honourable and worthy of attention, would amount to something half as special as it really is. His reputation as ‘the beloved, genial, Irish ambassador for the art of poetry’ is well-earned, certainly.⁸ But there is, for the above reasons, much more to it than geniality.

The manner of Heaney’s style alone establishes those aggressors against whom he protects poetry: his constant opponents are the ideologue and a certain kind of academic policeman, with their desiccative, politicising theories – and styles to match. The manner of his defence is, at its most fundamental, an extension of Larkin’s ‘pleasure principle’; he writes about poetry as a pleasure-inducing phenomenon in a pleasure-inducing way. Heaney resists succumbing in his work to the ‘cunning merger between poet, literary critic and academic critic’ (as Larkin calls it), and speaks always in the same clear, rich voice, the voice originating with Heaney the poet. His essays and poems, as Helen Vendler remarks, are exempla of both ‘soul’ and ‘style’.⁹ ‘Poetry, like all art, is inextricably bound up with giving pleasure’; and in his essays, again and again, Heaney delights in the pleasure of poems, mimicking their ability to give pleasure by delighting his reader.¹⁰ His excitement at the processes of poetry, his amazement at their effect, are expressed in images and arguments that in turn excite and amaze, that do full justice – as no other apologist for poetry has done – to poetry’s pleasure-giving properties.

Furthermore, all the evidence suggests that Heaney is blessed with the kind of sensibility that is inclusive rather than exclusionary. He resists the almost mandatory secularism of the contemporary academic and critic, both in his insistence on the ability of poetry to ‘awaken the spiritual in human experience’ and in his use of Catholic Christian terminology in depicting the processes and functions of poetry.¹¹ Though never doctrinally religious in his critical vocabulary, he is notably relaxed about borrowing terms from religion: these are, he seems to believe, part of our necessary cultural inheritance as well as the terms most expressive of the human being’s inarguable spiritual

⁸ Frazier, 1.

⁹ Helen Vendler, ‘Seamus Heaney’, in *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 149.

¹⁰ Larkin, *Required Reading*, 81.

¹¹ Phyllis Carey, ‘Heaney and Havel: Parables of Politics’, in *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*, ed. C. Malloy and P. Carey, (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), 139; Corcoran, 210.

needs. These characteristics of his prose differentiate him significantly from most other defenders of poetry, and the importance of that terminology to his argument must not be underestimated.

II

Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978 is Heaney's first collection of essays, and its focus is, to a large extent, the nature of the creative act. In this collection, as both in his other critical writings and in his poetry, Heaney has two primary metaphors for the poet: the priest and the peasant, one who works with the spirit and one who works with the dirt. Implicit in these recurrent metaphors is a view – one which permeates his defence – of poetry as a natural, organic process which simultaneously issues a transcendent experience. Heaney believes, without embarrassment, in the numinous aspect of poetry, but insists as vehemently on its profound connection with the earth – that is, with tangible, corporeal reality, and with agricultural-style labour. In his poetry, this is most obviously and famously expressed in 'Digging'; but this combination of metaphors appears in many other poems, too, some of which are discussed in Chapter 5.

'Belfast' is the earliest essay in which poetry is depicted as such, and in this instance Heaney's central comparison conflates the spiritual and the carnal: 'I have always listened for poems,' he writes. 'They come sometimes like bodies come out of a bog, almost complete, seeming to have been laid down a long time ago, surfacing with a touch of mystery.'¹² Poems, in these terms, are of the land, but that land itself is a creative force: like the bog people, poetry and its origins are both 'secret and natural'.¹³ In this image, the bodies are a product, by some mysterious process, of the bog itself, like the 'Grauballe Man', who is a salmagundi of organic elements:

... The grain of his wrists
is like bog oak,
the ball of his heel

¹² Seamus Heaney, 'Belfast', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 34.

¹³ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 34.

like a basalt egg.
His instep has shrunk
cold as a swan's foot
or a wet swamp root.

His hips are the ridge
and purse of a mussel,
his spine an eel arrested
under a glisten of mud.¹⁴

Heaney makes it clear that he does not consider the process of writing to involve only waiting and passive reception: poems involve conscious crafting and willed elements. But his closing depiction of that craft, in this essay, puts one in mind of the sorcerer: 'the secret of being a poet ... lies in the summoning of the energies of words'.¹⁵ The very earthliness, the tangible, substantial weight of a poem is borne of something decidedly insubstantial, something ethereal. 'He clearly thinks,' according to Harold Bloom, 'that a poem comes up out of the dark, almost unbidden, organically oozing up through capillary channels pressured by incomprehensible forces'.¹⁶ In 'The Makings of a Music', Heaney once again refers to 'energies', this time in his description of 'composition as listening ... a surrender to energies that spring within the centre of the mind'. Here, the energies are perhaps more than merely linguistic, but they speak to the vitality and motion that is central, for Heaney, to the act of composition, to inspiration itself; a vitality always accompanied by a degree of 'wise passiveness' on the part of the poet.¹⁷

There are echoes of this process in 'Feeling into Words', where Heaney uses a cluster of metaphors in an attempt to provide a more complete picture of poetry's role. Here, the comparison of poems to bog people is more generally rendered in terms of archaeological discovery. Heaney asserts once more poetry's equal involvement with the life of the supernal, the mysterious, and the life of the soil, as he describes

¹⁴ Heaney, *New Selected Poems*, 69, lines 5-16.

¹⁵ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 34, 36.

¹⁶ Harold Bloom, 'Introduction', in *Seamus Heaney*, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 34.

¹⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'The Makings of a Music', in *Preoccupations" Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 63.

poetry as divination, poetry as revelation of the self to the self, as restoration of the culture to itself; poems as elements of continuity, with the aura and authenticity of archaeological finds ... poetry as a dig, a dig for finds ...¹⁸

Michael Parker points out that Heaney's images for poetry here 'could equally apply to the Mass or any other sacred ritual', practices which are an obvious source of tradition and thus constancy – although that suggestion ignores the progress from spiritual to earthly in the act of divination, from sensing the presence of water to scooping up the dry earth to reveal mud.¹⁹ The poet is like the diviner, Heaney explains, specifically 'in his function of making contact with what lies hidden, and in his ability to make palpable what was sensed or raised'.²⁰ It is these activities – of discovery, of seeking and finding – that relate divination and archaeology, but divination is both science and art, an exploration guided by something unseen (and leading to something unseen). The image of the diviner incorporates the sense of the poet as originator, as worker, and it is one of a set of similar characterisations of the poet by Heaney, in both his poetry and his prose. Blake Morrison has commented on the Irish writer's tendency to compare the poet's work to 'that of carpenters, water-diviners, blacksmiths, thatchers and a whole range of folksy-craftsy "makers"'.²¹ At the same time, however, there is an underlying religious metaphor at work here, related to the Catholic discourse that often informs Heaney's writing:

a displaced Catholicism ... function[s] ... when a poem is regarded as a visitation to the poet, who acts as its transmitter; this is a version of creative intransitivity which no doubt draws on ideas of both Romantic inspiration and Modernist impersonality but it may also owe something to the concept of divine grace and its acting independently of the recipient's state of mind or being, or, indeed, to the Catholic concept of priesthood in which, similarly, sacramentality operates independently of the state of grace of its agents.²²

¹⁸ Seamus Heaney, 'Feeling into Words', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 41.

¹⁹ Parker, 18.

²⁰ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 48. Heaney's use of 'diviner' can be traced back to Sidney's use of *vates* – meaning 'prophet' or 'diviner' – in his 'An Apology for Poetry'. (Alan Peacock, 'Mediations: Poet as Translator', in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. E. Andrews, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), 238.)

²¹ Blake Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, (London: Methuen & Co., 1982), 15.

²² Corcoran, 210.

Digging, on the other hand, is undoubtedly manual, and implies the labour and nobility involved in writing: it depicts the poet with his or her hands in the dirt, a particularly physical engagement.²³ The poet digs for the historically and culturally rich images and words that constitute a poem, and in this sense restores to the culture a kind of language and a depth of expression that it has lost; poetry is, as Derek Walcott has it, a process ‘of excavation and of self-discovery’, for the individual and for the community.²⁴ Jay Parini, in *Why Poetry Matters*, shamelessly appropriates Heaney’s notion of this process in a manner which nonetheless serves as a useful elaboration of the idea. ‘Poetry restores the culture to itself: mirroring what it finds there already but also sensing and embodying the higher purposes and buried ideals of that culture, granting access to hidden sources of power’.²⁵ The work of the poet, then, as Parini puts it, is to ‘restore language to its meaning’, its fullest, original, forgotten meaning.²⁶ He speaks elsewhere about language – although ‘poetry’ would be more accurate to Heaney’s argument – ‘as a kind of echo-chamber in which the origins of words ... enhance their current denotations and connotations. Often unconsciously, the root meanings of words add resonance and meaning to the language of the poem’.²⁷ Nor is he alone in this conception. The Polish writer Stanislaw Baranczak likewise describes poetry’s purpose as being to make ‘the reader aware of the word’s hidden semantic possibilities’, and this is surely what Heaney means, in part, when he speaks of invoking a word’s peculiar energy.²⁸

At the same time as poetry reawakens the culture through language – through its internal, auditory operations, as conceived of by Heaney – it reflects and reveals the

²³ Robert Welch, “‘A Rich Young Man Leaving Everything He Had’: Poetic Freedom in Seamus Heaney”, in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. E. Andrews, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), 153.

²⁴ Derek Walcott, *What the Twilight Says: Essays*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), 70.

²⁵ Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 22. This attitude to poetry’s relationship with the origins of the language and culture are reminiscent of Emerson’s description of that relationship in ‘The Poet’: ‘the poets made all the words, and therefore language is the archives of history ... a sort of tomb of the muses. For though the origin of most of our words is forgotten, each word was at first a stroke of genius, and obtained currency because for the moment it symbolized the world to the first speaker and to the hearer. The etymologist finds the deadest word to have been once a brilliant picture. Language is fossil poetry.’ (Ralph Waldo Emerson, ‘The Poet’, (*The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*), 1998). http://rwe.org/works/Essays-2nd_Series_1_Poet.htm (September 25, 2008).)

²⁶ Jay Parini, ‘The Ground Possessed’, in *Seamus Heaney*, ed H. Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 108.

²⁷ Parini, *Why Poetry Matters*, x.

²⁸ Stanislaw Baranczak, “‘The Revenge of a Mortal Hand’”, in *Breathing Under Water and Other East European Essays*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1990), 244.

reader to the reader (and the poet to the poet), making familiar experiences new, and uncovering places in the self that would otherwise go unconsidered. As one critic has noted, Heaney betrays here ‘an interest in what lies hidden, neglected or suppressed’, and proposes ‘an idea of poetry which combines psychic investigation with historical enquiry’.²⁹ The nature of this exploration, I would suggest, is acoustic rather than semantic for Heaney. As will become evident in my later discussion of the auditory imagination in Heaney’s work, his abiding interest is in words as historical entities providing access to pre-historic, pre-linguistic sensations and inclinations. In ‘The God in the Tree’, he elaborates on the way in which words, as ‘archives’ of the past and of language, interact with each other:

poetry of any power is always deeper than its declared meaning. The secret between the words, the binding element, is often a psychic force that is elusive, archaic and only half-apprehended by maker and audience.³⁰

Elsewhere in *Preoccupations*, Heaney compares the discovery of what is concealed to crossing an intellectual and emotional frontier and plundering ‘the inarticulate’.³¹ Poetry finds its origins prior to words and prior to ideas – it starts, according to Frost, as ‘a lump in the throat, a homesickness, a lovesickness’. This inexpressible ache ‘finds the thought and the thought finds the words’.³² In his reading of Frost’s formulation, Heaney returns to the dual nature of poetry as entailing both spirit and sweat: the first sensing of that ache ‘involves the divining, vatic, oracular function’, and the poem’s quest for language involves ‘the making function’. Heaney goes on to distinguish between these functions using the terms ‘technique’ and ‘craft’. Technique, as he defines it, is the ability to ‘mediate between the origins of feeling in memory and experience and the formal ploys that express these in a work of art’. Technique, then, as Heaney defines it, is the work of the priest, the diviner, the sorcerer, the uncoverer of mysteries, who uses his diviner’s rod, his rosary, his magical equipment, to open the way

²⁹ Elmer Andrews, ‘Introduction’, in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), 2.

³⁰ Seamus Heaney, ‘The God in the Tree’, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 186.

³¹ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 47.

³² Qtd in Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 49.

to a spiritual experience. It involves ‘a gift for being in touch with what is there, hidden and real’, and, most importantly, the ability to make what is there available to those who need it. Craft, on the other hand, is ‘the skill of making’, those tricks and traditions a poet learns, Heaney explains, from other writers – in other words, the domain of the peasant-farmer, the hands-on worker who digs the well once water has been found. This is a task involving talent and intuition of a different kind, and one learnt through apprenticeship to a master or masters.³³ The poet, bringing together both aspects of the creative process, becomes both priest and peasant, both talented and trained.

In his characterisation of the poetic act as a combination of apparently disparate elements lies much of the genius of Heaney’s defence. To the Irish writer, poetry involves waiting as well as action, it encompasses the spiritual and the corporeal, it conjures the familiar while revealing the unknown. These descriptions are the first attempt by a defender of poetry to establish the craft as both manual, if you like, and spiritual labour. They reveal, not least, Heaney’s unique ability to turn to his advantage – and to the advantage of his prose and poetry – what one might have assumed to be a disadvantage, namely his rural background, particularly in a postmodern, predominantly urban world. The agricultural imagery which so enriches and characterises his poems (to such a degree that Al Alvarez has suggested it is a pretension) here allows him to establish as clearly, perhaps, as only a Roman-Catholic farmer could, the spiritual/earthly binary that is inherent in poetry.³⁴

Heaney would have us recognise that poetry is not limited by either the rarefied moral claims made on its behalf or its close relationship to the dirt and sweat of reality: it is equally at home, and useful, in both realms. In fact, it creates a singular amalgam of the one and the other, such that, in Heaney’s conception, they cannot finally be separated. It is therefore no surprise that the effect of Heaney’s description of the poetic process, as well as of his own writing of it and about it, is of an unusual wholeness, as if the entire gamut of human being itself, from the carnal to the spiritual, were forged into a

³³ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 47, 49.

³⁴ In his review of *Field Work*, Alvarez proposes that ‘Heaney is not rural and sturdy and domestic, with his feet planted firmly in the Irish mud, but is instead an ornamentalist, a word collector, a connoisseur of fine language for its own sake’. (Al Alvarez, ‘A Fine Way With the Language’, in *The New York Review of Books*, March 6, 1980, 16.) I would suggest that Heaney is, patently, both: of rural extraction and famously domestic, but also enchanted, obsessed, with language itself, for its own sake.

continuity. In a time in which ‘alienation’ has long since become a cliché, there is, perhaps uniquely, nothing alienated or alienating in Heaney’s conception of poetry, whichever metaphor one might choose to articulate this – and precisely because that conception is not fundamentally exclusionary. This is his deep sanity, if you will; also, one suspects, the source of much of his popularity, whether acknowledged or not. (In this respect, at least, he calls to mind another uniquely non-alienated poet of the twentieth century, Pablo Neruda, much of whose work, whatever its exultations, is also profoundly of the earth.) Since Plato, ideas about the nature of inspiration have ranged from divine vision to secular madness, and emphasis has always been placed on the peculiarity, the essential aberrance of the experience. In Heaney’s work, we find a picture of the process as both deeply mysterious and profoundly natural, and, moreover, rooted in that which is, after all, the matrix of all life: the earth itself.

III

That combination of the enigmatic and the organic is nowhere more fully expressed than in Heaney’s conception of the ‘auditory imagination’, a notion he borrows from Eliot and on which his defence, in large part, will come to rest. In an essay from *Preoccupations* entitled ‘Englands of the Mind’. Heaney quotes Eliot’s own formulation of this imaginative capacity, which early and late will constitute one of his theoretical touchstones. Eliot, in his essay on Matthew Arnold, speaks of a kind of aural seismograph that poets possess:

the feeling for syllable and rhythm, penetrating far below the conscious levels of thought and feeling, invigorating every word; sinking to the most primitive and forgotten, returning to the origin and bringing something back ... [fusing] the most ancient and the most civilised mentality.³⁵

³⁵ Qtd in Seamus Heaney, ‘Englands of the Mind’, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux), 150. Elsewhere in this collection, in ‘The Fire i’ the Flint’, Heaney makes reference to the auditory imagination as involved in the surfacing of poetry from the poet’s unconscious and he again quotes Eliot’s formulation of it in ‘Learning from Eliot’. (Seamus Heaney, ‘The Fire i’ the Flint’, in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 81; Seamus Heaney, ‘Learning from Eliot’, in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 36.)

As with so many of his borrowings from other writers, Heaney is able to attribute a significance to the auditory imagination that makes it far more than a routine literary-critical phrase; it is, as Anne Stevenson rightly calls it, the ‘mainspring of his own inspiration’.³⁶

Eliot was thinking here about the cultural depth-charges latent in certain words and rhythms, that binding secret between words in poetry that delights not just the ear but the whole backward and abyss of mind and body; thinking of the energies beating in and between words that the poet brings into half-deliberate play; thinking of the relationship between the word as pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history, memory and attachments.³⁷

This is one of Heaney’s most accomplished, most memorable descriptions of the linguistic forces involved in the poetic act, forces which seem, albeit in muted expository form, to be present in this passage itself. Poetry is once more the locus of a binary, bringing together sound and sense, harmony and history, in a single act of highly charged kinesis. In the poetic medium, words become caught up in a kind of Brownian motion, an endlessly variable, unpredictable exchange of energy and momentum, both phonetic and semantic. Poetry, combining words in such a way as to galvanize their potential as sheer sound, as denotation and connotation, recalls for us not only our physical being but our being in a specific culture, in history, as well.

Sound is of course central in this account of the matter; but it also stems from ‘an arduous cooperation of mind and feeling and ear’.³⁸ The idea of this collaboration between sound and sense is pivotal to Heaney’s defence: the auditory imagination becomes the very condition, the resource, which enables poetry to mean at all, and it is not merely the icing on a poem’s semantic cake. For Heaney, as for T.S. Eliot, the old blanket terms – ‘music’ or ‘sound’ in their traditionally limited senses – are not adequate to describe this aspect of poetry, which, for these critics, is particularly powerful precisely because it is not simply a verbal approximation of musical melody. Heaney implies as much in ‘Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam’, when he reveals that Nadezhda

³⁶ Stevenson, 132.

³⁷ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 150.

³⁸ Vendler, ‘Seamus Heaney’, 152.

Mandelstam uses the phrase ‘a dig “for the nugget of harmony”’ to describe her husband’s poetic process. In her use of the metaphor, the value of the ‘nugget’ lies both in its relation to history, tradition and memory, and its euphonic properties. The successful creation of a poem is simultaneously the creation of ‘harmony’, the sounding of words in tune, perhaps, with the world.³⁹ That which is called forth by the sound of words thus has, in Heaney, the same power as those primordial or archetypal images of which Jung once wrote:

whoever speaks in primordial images speaks with a thousand voices; he enthrals and overpowers, while at the same time he lifts the idea he is seeking to express out of the occasional and transitory into the realm of the ever-enduring. He transmutes our personal destiny into the destiny of mankind, and evokes in us all those beneficial forces that ever and anon have enabled humanity to find a refuge from every peril and to outlive every dark night.⁴⁰

Like these images, it is the auditory imagination which is the root and branch of the art of poetry; and it is the central justification of that art form because it allows entry to what Harry White calls ‘an otherwise inaccessible experience’, one which is wholly beneficial.⁴¹ The inextricable link between sound and meaning is unique to poetry; it situates the art form on the borderline between music and language, and on the borderline between our conscious and subconscious. It permits us the enlargement, the enrichment, of an experience encompassing both our apperceptions and our subconscious minds, not only awakening our most elemental selves but creating communication, cooperation, between those selves and our daily, rational beings. The result of that interchange of energy, of meaning, is like that of Jung’s primordial images acting on our psyches – that is, the fortification of our human spirits. We become, in short, better people; not ethically, morally so, but in our talent, as it were, for humanity itself. The holistic psychological and emotional balance afforded us by the auditory imagination (at peak powers) is akin, perhaps, to the feeling of complete physical, muscular harmony experienced by a dancer or a runner when his or her body is fully, congruously exerted; and it is poetry alone that

³⁹ Seamus Heaney, ‘Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam’, in *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 83.)

⁴⁰ Carl Jung, *Collected Works Vol. 15: The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 82.

⁴¹ Harry White, *Music and the Irish Literary Imagination*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 28.

affords us, so immediately and so profoundly, that opportunity for equilibrium. This, then, is the significance of the auditory imagination, and the reason that it becomes, for Heaney, the bedrock of his defence: it is unique to poetry, the very source of the art form's forcibleness and its capacity to be of use to us. Without the auditory imagination, 'poetry as an art is in danger of being overshadowed by a quest for poetry as a diagram of political attitudes'.⁴² Heaney goes on,

I do not in fact see how poetry can survive as a category of human consciousness if it does not put poetic considerations first – expressive considerations, that is, based upon its own genetic laws which spring into operation at the moment of lyric conception.⁴³

Poetry fuelled by the auditory imagination is not chaotic or uncontrolled – rather, it is generated by a kind of poetic DNA, its own intrinsic system. If that system is overridden by an external one, if the poet does not prioritise the demands of the creative act rather than the social, moral or political one, then poetry cannot sustain the qualities that establish it as a distinct way of experiencing the world. Heaney seems, in this instance and in others, to be something of an essentialist. He is not saying anything about the 'content' of poetry. Rather he is an essentialist as to the elements, the ingredients, as it were, that have to be present if a poem is to remain faithful to the nature of poetry – and thus to bring to us the poetic experience. And it is only in fulfilling that original mandate that the art form supplies a credible justification for itself. Poetry has to begin with the auditory imagination; this is, as it were, its linguistic genetic marker. Leave this out – that is, forget the auditory imagination for some ulterior consideration, however virtuously motivated – and you are forgetting the element which, in Heaney's formulation, defines poetry. If we do this, we not only sell short the art form, but we make it vulnerable to attack. For then, lacking the foundation provided by its own defining processes, the language of poetry becomes just politics or religion or social commentary by other means – a kind of inferior, perhaps even childish, form of prose.

If Ezra Pound is commonly, perhaps all too ritually, regarded as having the finest ear of twentieth-century English-language poets – and his sense of the line, particularly

⁴² Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 219.

⁴³ Heaney, *Government*, 166.

outside the template of iambic metre, gives credence to this – then Heaney may justly be said to have the finest ear for the sound-properties of individual words: the juxtaposition of consonants, embedded alliteration, the resonance of certain vowel sounds. In his emphasis on the auditory imagination, therefore, he is not only playing to one of his strengths; he is foregrounding that to which his own extraordinary ear naturally inclines him. No poet before him has given so much emphasis to the auditory imagination – made it so definitive of the process whereby poetry comes into being. Heaney's interpretation gives the notion far more scale and significance than, for instance, Eliot himself does. In 'Matthew Arnold', Eliot says nothing more about the concept, which he presents as a way of explaining what Arnold's poetry, in his view, lacks. Indeed, one critic has contended that for all its fame among Eliot's prose passages, the notion itself is one of Eliot's least illuminating, most unhelpfully generalised references to the music of poetry.⁴⁴ For the Irish writer, on the other hand, the auditory imagination embodies another one of the binaries that are characteristic of poetry as he conceives of it: earth and spirit, seeking and awaiting, mind and body, and now sound and sense. In this way, his reading of Eliot's conception is to make of it a cog – of perfect size and design – in the machine of a broader argument, one crucial to the motion and productivity of that machine. The importance of those contrasting pairs to Heaney's defence is that, he argues, poetry unifies them, conjoining them in what Les Murray would call, albeit clumsily, the 'wholespeak' of poetry; and that balance, that unification, is central to Heaney's understanding of what makes good poetry, and what, moreover, makes it uniquely valuable.⁴⁵ Octavio Paz intimates something similar in 'The Other Voice':

the operative mode of poetic thought is imagining, and imagination consists, essentially, of the ability to place contrary or divergent realities in relationship. All poetic forms and all linguistic figures have one thing in common: they seek, and often find, hidden resemblances. In the most extreme cases, they unite opposites. Comparisons, analogies, metaphors, metonymies, and the other devices of poetry – all tend to produce images in which this and that, the one and the other, the one and the many are joined ...⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Martin Scofield, *T.S. Eliot: The Poems*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 79-80.

⁴⁵ Les Murray, 'Embodiment and Incarnation', in *The Paperbark Tree: Selected Prose*, (London: Carcanet Press, 1992), 263.

⁴⁶ Octavio Paz, 'The Other Voice', in *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry*, trans. H. Lane, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 158.

The coexistence of such fundamentally opposed elements in a harmonious, efficacious whole – a whole which not only yokes together, but directs the forces of those elements – is achieved by no other art form, no other form of language, than poetry; and poetry is, therefore, ultimate speech. Such is the implication of Heaney's argument.

The degree to which poetry's overall efficacy relies on the auditory imagination is demonstrated in one of the earliest essays in *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*, 'Osip and Nadezhda Mandelstam', in which Heaney explores a context where the auditory imagination is handicapped, or absent altogether. When this occurs, poetry fails not only to move, to live, but also to mean. The Irish writer describes Mandelstam's stance towards sound and meaning, a stance that is, in essence, Heaney's own. He refers to Mandelstam's 'devotion to the physical word, the etymological memory bank, the word as its own form and content' – a reaction, in part, to the 'metaphysical dualism' of the Russian Symbolists, just as Heaney's own allegiance to it might be read, at some level, as a response to postmodernism's groundlessness. Heaney quotes Mandelstam's notion that 'the word is a bundle and meaning sticks out of it in various directions' (ready to be snagged, in Heaney's formulation, on the meanings of juxtaposed words), and remarks on 'his profound contact with the common, miraculous resources of the [Russian] language as a phonetic instrument'. Writing, it seems, of an absence of precisely that linguistic energy described by Heaney in *Preoccupations*, Mandelstam laments the leaching of meaning from language, by Russian Symbolism, in his well-known criticism of the Symbolist rose:⁴⁷

the rose is a likeness of the sun, the sun is a likeness of the rose, a dove – of a girl, and a girl – of a dove. Images are gutted like scarecrows and packed with foreign content. In place of the Symbolist forest, we are left with a workshop producing scarecrows ... Nothing is left but a terrifying quadrille of 'correspondences' nodding to one another. Eternal winking. Never a clear word, nothing but hints and reticent whispers. The rose nods to the girl, the girl to the rose. No one wants to be himself.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ Heaney, *Government*, 77-78.

⁴⁸ Mandelstam qtd in Heaney, *Government*, 78.

Instead of harbouring layer upon layer of acoustical meaning, here the words fail to signify even their most basic, essential referents. Symbols always of something other than themselves, they become empty vessels – nothing in themselves, and unresponsive, by extension, to the catalytic potential of sound.

Robert Frost's notion of the 'sound of sense', though somewhat less important to Heaney's defence than Eliot's work, is nevertheless an additional tributary that flows into Heaney's conception of poetry and its importance. Frost's description of this primordial, ancient intonation has, in Heaney's reading, much in common with the auditory imagination: if achieved by a poem, that intonation allows it to ride the momentum of the language as an entity, becoming absorbed into the familiar and deeply evocative rhythms of that language. In 'The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath', Heaney remarks that in both Frost's and Eliot's writing there is a strong element of self-justification at work:

what is implicit here is an argument for the deep humanity of the achieved poem, its access to an evolutionary racial ear. The auditory imagination ... unites reader and poet and poem in an experience of enlargement, of getting beyond the confines of the first person singular, of widening the lens of receptivity until it reaches and is reached by the world beyond the self.⁴⁹

Poetry, then, moves readers beyond its own boundaries, and beyond themselves, not only allowing access to that which lies immediately outside the self, but also to that which has seemed unreachable and indeed is unreachable, it appears, by any other means. By aligning itself with the internal rhythms of language, the poem harnesses the energy of the language as a whole. In this way, poetry outpaces the self, and 'sound and meaning rise like a tide out of language to carry individual utterance away on a current stronger and deeper than the individual could have anticipated.'⁵⁰ This is the strengthened, widened river on which the poem arrived in the first place, a linguistic phenomenon that is universal in its reach. Heaney is talking, here, about the transformation of the personal, intimate speech act into a poetic act which, by means of its sound as much as anything else, is accessible to readers other than the poet. The beat of the poem, its deepest intonation and movement and the meaning they produce, are recognisable to us *because*

⁴⁹ Seamus Heaney, 'The Indefatigable Hoof-Taps: Sylvia Plath', in *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), 149.

⁵⁰ Heaney, *Government*, 149.

we are human beings – with all that implies about our common ancestry, our common experiences, and indeed our shared capacity for speech – and they are familiar to us in the most unavoidable, undeniable sense, an aural equivalent of the Jungian conception of the archetypal.

It will be clear from the essays discussed above that one branch of Heaney's defence derives in no small part from Eliot, Frost, and their respective articulations of the power of sound; as we will increasingly see, this is the case with many other aspects of Heaney's argument. What distinguishes him from his predecessors is his style – in this instance his rejection of that impersonal, largely theoretical style of criticism so characteristic of Eliot – and what Neil Corcoran calls 'his unerring sense of what, as Ezra Pound said in another context, is "of present use", or may be made so'; in other words, his superb sensibility, the way in which he is able to discern and extract those quotations from among the work of his forebears and contemporaries that are germane to his purposes. Repeatedly, we both witness and overhear him, in his commentary on other writers, 'interiorize ... and transform' the relevant passages into a constellation, a configuration, which then informs his own critical method.⁵¹ Heaney's instinct for potent word-combinations in his poetry is just as strongly evident in his ability to combine ideas and specific passages in his criticism: the relation between Frost and Eliot (often taken to be poetic opposites), between Mandelstam and Milosz, between Weil and Havel and a dozen other writers, enlivens his prose and establishes an unexpected, dynamic system of give and take that is, in fact, a product of Heaney's own acute critical sense. His genius is a cumulative genius; in other words, he adds together rather than excludes, and he sees things – even ostensible opposites – as being coextensive (or at least in a continuum) rather than at war with one another, as is so often held. And the result is always a sense of enlarged purpose, whether as regards human being as such or the art of poetry specifically.

IV

The auditory imagination, with its complete unity of sound and sense – perhaps the most integrated of all Heaney's conceptions – is a characteristic of poetry which critics, and,

⁵¹ Corcoran, 226.

indeed, some poets, have found it hard to accept, both historically and in the present era. Most recently, John Carey, in *What Good Are The Arts?*, challenges Heaney's belief that, as Carey understands it,

poetry works through making noises that stir deep unconscious memories, both racial memories of man's pre-verbal cave-dwelling past and memories of our own childhood – possibly, as others have suggested, though Heaney does not, memories of the first semi-articulate converse between mother and child. The effect of these memories is to make us trust the 'promptings of our intuitive being' (as opposed, presumably, to logic, reason and science) ...⁵²

Carey, who rejects the notion that art of any kind can improve its recipients in any way (one which Heaney embraces, in his own terms) likewise rejects Heaney's argument for the acoustic influence of poetry on our inner beings, the idea that poetry's music 'prevails on [people] to trust the intuitive, sympathetic and vulnerable parts of themselves, giving them an inner strength to withstand the "wrongness all around"'.⁵³ His criticism of the idea is based on what he interprets as the stumbling-blocks to understanding in this argument, and the fact that the similarity 'between the sound of poetry and the noises made by cavemen, infants, or whatever other pre-verbal creature is intended, is impossible to establish'.⁵⁴

Carey's rationalistic bent, most obvious in his apparent setting up of an opposition between poetry's promptings and scientific reason, is similarly betrayed in his interpretation of Heaney's remarks about that which is 'ancient' and 'primitive' as a reference to the memory, in people, of the grunts of cavemen and infants. This is an unnecessary assumption to make, I would argue, but the possibility that Heaney may be speaking of something more nebulous than an evolutionary memory of actual speech is not an idea that Carey will countenance. The critic is, in any case, setting up a straw man, an argument based precisely on the kind of diminished, 'un-whole' conception of human being that Heaney opposes. Carey's human is a biological machine, with neither imagination nor spirit, a creature embodying all that is alienating, all that is counter-intuitive, about extreme materialism. And what Carey requires of that machine, in all its

⁵² Carey, *What Good Are The Arts?*, 114-115.

⁵³ Carey, *What Good Are The Arts?*, 115.

⁵⁴ Carey, *What Good Are The Arts?*, 115.

outputs – not least poetry – is a kind of crude productivity reminiscent of Auden's conviction that in order to be of value, poetry must be shown to have saved Jewish lives during the Holocaust.

It is science itself, however, that punches the biggest hole in Carey's argument – specifically linguistic science. The pre-verbal noises of infants, their babbling, is, contrary to what Carey seems to think, systematic and predictable, and wholly in keeping with the most fundamental and unchanging structures of language itself. Its music, moreover, is universal: all babies, regardless of their origins, babble the same sounds at more or less the same time in their development, and those sounds are ordered by their place of articulation, the position of the tongue in their mouths as they speak; the tongue, in other words, governs. The similarity between those sounds and the common sound structures of poetry is therefore quite possible to establish; and while no such study has, as far as I know, been conducted, the very systematic nature of babbling, its ordering of sounds by their articulation, would seem to have much in common with the musical instincts of the poet, as demonstrated by even the simplest of poetic techniques – alliteration and assonance. Furthermore, as the linguist M.M. Lewis points out, an established stage in the babbling period is characterised by the discovery that sounds are a source of pleasure, not for the response they provoke from caregivers, but for their own texture and aural sensation. Babies babble for the sake of babbling, because, like Mandelstam, they like the way sounds feel in their mouths. Poetry, as defined by Heaney, is, one might argue, an 'adult' means of regaining that pleasure, and perhaps with it the sense of profound, original self-discovery that accompanies infancy.⁵⁵ Terry Eagleton, for one, would concur: 'poets, like infants, relish sounds for their own sakes. Poetry is a superior form of babbling'.⁵⁶

Philipp Wolf, in an essay on Heaney and Heidegger, also objects to the general assertion (in both Heaney's prose and poetry) that poetry can help through its sound.

To be sure, prosody and melody are always relevant to sense and meaning in literature and in particular, poetry. But if we look at it soberly, is it really possible to evoke a kind of individual universal, spatial and supertemporal identity of presence through poetic and tonal modulation and the articulation of certain

⁵⁵ M.M. Lewis, *Infant Speech: A Study of the Beginnings of Language*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 63.

⁵⁶ Terry Eagleton, *How to Read a Poem*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 58.

words or names? ... And could the tonal substance of words and place-names by any means release that kind of mythologically orphic charm ... ?⁵⁷

Wolf's criticism is not limited to the auditory imagination per se, but includes the general notion that poetry's sound can accomplish anything at all of value, of lasting worth; and it should be noted that his criticism relates, also, to the way in which Heaney seems to use place names in his poetry – 'Anahorish', 'Broagh', for instance – to conjure an identity and a history. Language and place are issues of abiding and often interlinked concern to Heaney, in both his creative and critical writing. In attempting to cast doubt on whether the meeting-point of those two entities, in the naming of places, has any particular power, Wolf ignores an entire school of social science that deals with language and identity, not least as that identity is asserted or recalled in the naming of geographical locations. In a postcolonial society such as Northern Ireland, such naming, and the utterance of those names, becomes a symbolic reclamation not only of power, but of history:

the naming and renaming of places is a crucial aspect of geographical 'discovery', establishing proprietorial claims through linguistic association with the colonising power. The same logic applies in every episode of 'spatial history' ... Spatial history 'begins and ends in language'; by the act of naming, space is symbolically transformed into place, a space with a history.⁵⁸

In Northern Ireland, that transformation is one enacted throughout its troubled history, both by the colonisers and the colonised; Irish-language place names, words from Irish dialect, mythological-historical references – all of which are markers of Heaney's own poetry – are today a means of reconstituting, of redefining, national identity, in a country where that identity has long been fragmented and limited along (not least) religious lines.⁵⁹ Catherine Nash argues that the articulation of such place names serves a dual purpose in contemporary Irish society: it summons up a shared past, and it also suggests a unified future, one inclusive of both Protestants and Catholics under the single identifier

⁵⁷ Philipp Wolf, 'Heaney and Heidegger: Poetry, Ontology and Ideology', in *Literature and Philosophy: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, ed. H. Grabes, (Stuttgart: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1997), 328.

⁵⁸ Peter Jackson, *Maps of Meaning*, (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 168.

⁵⁹ Catherine Nash, 'Irish Placenames: Post-colonial Locations', in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 24.4 (1999): 475.

‘Irish’. The ‘mythologically orphic charm’ to which Wolf so dubiously refers – he is, like Carey, suspicious of powers which cannot be rationally reduced – is abundantly present as a consequence of Ireland’s postcolonial status; language in such circumstances bears a far heavier weight of meaning than it might otherwise, and for Heaney as for other Irish writers, indeed for common Irish citizens, language is the foremost, the most accessible, carrier of myth and history. Moreover, the ‘tonal substance’, as Wolf calls it, of those words and names is the very essence of the matter; it is a language’s phonetic character, after all, that differentiates it most immediately, most clearly, from any other language. It is difficult, for instance, to mistake the fluid melodies of French for the guttural edges of German. Heaney may be speaking, in large part, of English rather than Irish-language poetry when he discusses the auditory imagination; but as his own poetry testifies, the combination of the vocabulary of rural Ireland with a music that seems to originate in Irish-English dialect, rather than in London or Liverpool dialect, is as evocative of Heaney’s homeland as his references to geographical locations.

Poets themselves, however, have also struggled with the binary of sound and sense as it exists in poetry, and in ‘Sounding Auden’, one of the later essays in *The Government of the Tongue*, Heaney discusses the problem which that dyad presented for the Anglo-American poet throughout his career – the impossibility, for Auden, of accepting such a force as the auditory imagination, with the seemingly irreconcilable elements of history and harmony working together. For Auden, Heaney writes,

on the one hand, poetry could be regarded as magical incantation, fundamentally a matter of sound and the power of sound to bind our minds’ and bodies’ apprehensions within an acoustic complex; on the other hand, poetry is a matter of making wise and true meanings, of commanding our emotional assent by the intelligent disposition and inquisition of human experience.⁶⁰

The poet is firstly a magician, poetry the enchantment whose power is, for Auden as for Heaney, Eliot, Frost and Mandelstam, phonetic. The emphasis here is on poetry as being literally spellbinding, irrespective of semantic content. At the same time, the poet is involved in revealing the truth, in disintoxicating (to use Auden’s word) the minds of others through the exercise of a sceptical and moralising intelligence. Heaney explains

⁶⁰ Heaney, *Government*, 109.

how a poet's ability to command our attention and arouse our assent arises from this nonpareil combination of truth and tone:

by poetic authority I mean the rights and weight which accrue to a voice not only because of a sustained history of truth-telling but by virtue also of its tonality, the sway it gains over the deep ear and, through that, over other parts of our mind and nature.⁶¹

As we absorb a poet's words, sound and meaning operating on us simultaneously, we are moved, often involuntarily, in the direction of their gesture. The voice of the truly authoritative poet is both eminently trustworthy – having proved itself thus in previous poems – and deeply, magnetically attractive in its timbre. Les Murray speaks of poetry being 'convincing, true to instinct and intuition, capable of stirring involuntary sympathy' in the reader, and this is precisely the force that Heaney identifies with sound.⁶²

There is, the Irish writer suggests here for the first time, a potential for confusion inherent in this particular 'duality': sound can override sense, or vice versa, and Auden himself was particularly, even preternaturally, aware of this potential. His lifelong conflict over the role of poetry, his fear, as Heaney has it, of poetry's siren-like power, were consequences of his time and place; consequences, finally, of the political accusation of which Auden grew ever more aware as he matured. For a time, Heaney argues, the Anglo-American poet was able to retain a shaky belief in the peaceful, healthful coexistence of sound and sense, and produce poetry that, reliant on its own processes, conveyed truth; 'but this unified sensibility fissured when Auden was inevitably driven to extend himself beyond the transmission of intuited knowledge, beyond poetic indirection and implication, and began spelling out those intuitions in a more explicit, analytic and morally ratified rhetoric'.⁶³

For Auden, then, sound and sense, magic and the reality principle, become finally irreconcilable; he cannot believe in a poetry that answers satisfactorily to both, despite his early, strained attempts, in his essays, to conceive of such a poetry. For Heaney, on the other hand, the matter is far clearer. Ideally, any possible confusion or imbalance between

⁶¹ Heaney, *Government*, 109.

⁶² Murray, 347.

⁶³ Heaney, *Government*, 127.

poetic music and poetic meaning is temporarily resolved by poems themselves: ‘in fact, most poems – including Auden’s – constitute temporary stays against the confusion threatened by the mind’s inclination to accept both accounts of poetic function in spite of their potential mutual exclusiveness’.⁶⁴ Heaney is of course paraphrasing Robert Frost’s description of poetry as a ‘momentary stay against confusion’. (For Frost, the poem elucidated our own existence; the confusion it resisted was the confusion of being alive, of daily living.)⁶⁵ But Heaney, characteristically adept in turning the metaphors of others to his own purposes, is speaking of a confusion of a different order. The apparently unbridgeable gap between the ways in which a poem makes meaning – through sheer sound on the one hand and through the intelligence enacted in words on the other – is, Heaney is concerned to point out, disposed of by Auden’s own poetry. Not only are poetry’s intoxicating and disintoxicating aspects reconcilable, but, in Heaney’s argument, they are inseparable: a poem’s truth-telling function can only be performed if it is also fulfilling the phonetic demands of the craft. This is a notion that recalls, of course, Sidney’s assertion that poetry teaches through delight.⁶⁶

What, then, is the essential difference between Auden and Heaney, which allows the Irish writer to reach this conclusion while his predecessor grows more and more doubtful – not simply about the possibility of sound and sense as a unified force, but about the efficacy of poetry at all, at any level? It might be suggested that Heaney, through his remarkably equable temperament and inclination towards the reconciliation of opposites, is skating over or hurrying to push together two plainly contrary facets of the art form; that Auden’s agony and final defeat at the hands of that contradiction is the more honest response. The difficulty with this position is that neither in his essay on Auden, nor in any of his other essays on the sound and sense of poetry can Heaney’s approach, his method of argument, be faulted for insubstantiality; the evidence is in the poetry itself, which Heaney reads and delights in for the benefit of his audience.

This practical aspect of his criticism, and the support it provides for his theory, is noted by commentators as early as the first reviews of *Preoccupations*. Robert Pinsky, in his *New York Times* review of the book, remarks that Heaney’s conception of poetry is

⁶⁴ Heaney, *Government*, 109.

⁶⁵ Heaney, *Government*, 95.

⁶⁶ Sidney, 10.

persuasive because it is ‘supported by the unfakable absorption in technique of the adept’.⁶⁷ Heaney himself ventures a half-apology for his preoccupation with poetic exegesis in the foreword to that first collection of essays, reminding the reader that his defining educational experiences took place at a time when practical criticism dominated literary academic practice.⁶⁸ Fifteen years later, reviewing *The Redress of Poetry*, J.D. McClatchy asserts that Heaney’s defence of poetry is far more concerned with the evidence of poetry itself than the propagation of ideas: it is in the finer details of texts, rather than in grand theoretical notions, that his argument finds its most convincing form.⁶⁹ Heaney does not ask us – he never asks us – simply to nod our heads in agreement; not before we have listened with his ears to the truth and the music of the poetry itself, heard them work together at peak powers. As Corcoran observes,

what distinguishes Heaney as a critic is the physicality of his ear ... the way, precisely, in which the contour of a meaning is traced within the pattern of a rhythm, or, sometimes, a rhyme or even, indeed, an etymology. Poetic authority is sought within poetic music; an ethics of interpretation is grounded in the description of a technique.⁷⁰

In ‘Sounding Auden’ that technique is described – as it typically is in Heaney’s essays – with reference to more than ten of Auden’s poems, as well as an assortment of works by other writers; each one comes under the super-sensitive scrutiny of Heaney’s ear and eye. This consistent practical criticism (what Pinsky, responding to Heaney’s fears of being overly didactic, calls ‘the best kind of teaching’) buttresses, as Heaney’s reviewers have noted, an argument that otherwise might well have collapsed under its own weight. Again and again, in his reading, Heaney shows us how sound and sense cooperate, at least in the best poems, to provide a richness, even an excess of meaning – a demonstration which overrides any scepticism one might have about possible conflict between the two. In fact, as Heaney discloses them, they are the systole and diastole of poetic meaning, the very reason we go to poetry in the first place.

⁶⁷ Robert Pinsky, Review of *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, *New York Times*, December 21, 1980. <http://www.nytimes.com/1980/12/21/books/heaney-pre.html> (February 2, 2009.)

⁶⁸ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 11-12.

⁶⁹ J.D. McClatchy, Review of *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, *New York Times*, December 24, 1995. <http://www.nytimes.com/1995/12/24/books/heaney-redress.html> (February 2, 2009.)

⁷⁰ Corcoran, 224-225. The phrase ‘[seek] the contour of a meaning...within the pattern of a rhythm’ is Heaney’s own, from ‘Learning from Eliot’. (Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 34.)

It should not be overlooked, either, in contemplating the differences between Auden and Heaney, that despite Heaney's far more immediate and prolonged contact with political violence and unrest, at least during his developmental years – which, one would assume, might make him understandably less likely than Auden to reach this point of equanimity concerning poetry – he retains one distinct advantage over the Anglo-American. This is his discipleship to the Eastern European writers, like Mandelstam, whose witness to poetry, whose faith in the importance of its utter autonomy, have provided Heaney with the outlines of his own artistic creed. His affinity with those writers is everywhere evident in his essays, and Heaney himself explains their importance to his writing in *The Government of the Tongue*:

I keep returning to them because there is something in their situation that makes them attractive to a reader whose formative experience has been largely Irish. There is an unsettled aspect to the different worlds they inhabit, and one of the challenges they face is to survive amphibiously, in the realm of the 'the times' and the realm of their moral and artistic self-respect, a challenge immediately recognizable to anyone who has lived with the awful and demeaning facts of Northern Ireland's history over the last couple of decades.⁷¹

In the strength of their belief in the necessity of poetry – a belief tested repeatedly by pressures unimaginable to most – such poets provide Heaney with a list of undeniably credible, reliable witnesses to the liberation, at times even personal salvation, available through the art form. Indeed, their unflinching faith in the power of poetry to overcome present horrors has fortified Heaney's own beliefs in this regard, as the discovery of such kinship always must. The Irish writer acknowledges as much in a recent interview, remarking that without their influence, he would not have been 'as convinced about the worthwhileness of writing itself'.⁷² Faced with an almost inconceivable degree of politicisation, these writers were able to see more clearly, perhaps, than others in countries less cursed, the extent to which poetry was not politics; and in this way they have been of use to Heaney. Mandelstam, for instance, provided him with models of

⁷¹ Seamus Heaney, 'The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker', in *The Government of the Tongue: Selected Prose 1978-1987*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), xx.

⁷² Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 297.

resistance, fuelling his own instinct for independence and the irreducible nature of the art form of poetry itself.

Auden, on the other hand, had no such church, as it were, in which to have his faith affirmed. Writing in the 1930s, just as the century was about to take arguably its most incomprehensible, unbearable political turn, he had to find his way alone, in a sense, through a morass of artistic and social responsibilities. It is no wonder, then, that he should have found it difficult to reach the level ground of Heaney's reconciliation of those same responsibilities – his belief that, as Octavio Paz has also stated, poetry's most defining characteristic is the intimate and inseparable fusion of sound and sense.⁷³

Heaney's conception of the necessarily autonomous processes, embodied in the auditory imagination, by which poetry comes into being, dominates his defence of the art form; it is the engine room, so to speak, of his argument. The nature of that argument itself, however, is inevitably determined by the charges against which it must defend poetry. For Heaney, those accusations are political in form – which, as I have already said, is to be expected given his background, his coming of age in Northern Ireland during the Troubles. It is to Heaney's defence of poetry against the political accusation, a defence founded in his notion of song, therefore, to which I will turn in the next chapter.

⁷³ Octavio Paz, 'A Balance Sheet and a Prediction', in *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry*, trans. H. Lane, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 140.

Chapter 3

Heaney's Defence of Poetry II: The Political Accusation

[Lyric poets] know that the integrity of the polis is guarded as much by the solitariness of their enterprise as by other people's solidarity, although it's hard to proclaim that truth when closed ranks and consensus are the things most in demand.

Seamus Heaney, interview with Dennis O'Driscoll¹

I

In one of his earliest essays, Heaney describes the moment, in 1969, in which he first felt the pressure of a political-poetic responsibility bearing down on him. The rioting in Belfast, which heralded the onset of an era of nationwide violence and bloodshed, heralded also the beginning, in Heaney's work, of an argument with those who would dismiss poetry as impotent, indeed offensive, in the face of political upheaval, as he himself strove to write poetry that was neither of those things.

From that moment the problems of poetry moved from being simply a matter of achieving the satisfactory verbal icon to being a search for images and symbols adequate to our predicament. I do not mean liberal lamentation that citizens should feel compelled to murder one another or deploy their different military arms over the matter of nomenclatures such as British and Irish. I do not mean public celebrations or execrations of resistance or atrocity ... I mean that I felt it imperative to discover a field of force in which, without abandoning fidelity to the processes and experience of poetry as I have outlined them, it would be possible to encompass the perspectives of a humane reason and at the same time to grant the religious intensity of the violence its deplorable authenticity and complexity.²

That field of force is established and maintained most powerfully, of course, in Heaney's poetry, and much has been written about the ways in which that poetry confronts the political questions unavoidable to an Irish writer of his generation; this is something which Heaney never does by simplifying or merely bemoaning the conflicts and catastrophes of his homeland. A different kind of response, one by the necessity of its medium more extensive and more general, is to be found in Heaney's essays. The abiding, underlying concern of *Preoccupations* and *The Government of the Tongue* is the

¹ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 382.

² Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 56-57.

ability of poetry to make a sufficient, a fully adequate response to the demands, above all, of the politician and the activist.

The earliest published essay in *Preoccupations*, 'Canticles to the Earth: Theodore Roethke', mentions briefly society's attempts to constrict the movement, the freedom of poetry by imposing political or other demands on the art form; Heaney broadly characterises this pressure as applied by 'the spirit of the age'.³ Though some imprint of a particular time and place, its biases not least, will be evident in a poet's work – and this is a theme throughout Heaney's essays – he or she should not make historical or political circumstances the driving force, the life source, of his or her poetry. Rather, the poet must maintain, as a primary obligation, 'an awareness of his own poetic process, and a trust in the possibility of his poetry'.⁴ That trust, as it implicitly stands in opposition to political fidelity, is characterised, in much of *Preoccupations*, as a kind of religious faith – not a substitute for a religion, but a metaphorical deity to whom the poet owes his or her allegiance.

Six years after his essay on Roethke, Heaney again tackles the relationship between poetry and society in an essay entitled 'Faith, Hope and Poetry', the first in which he mentions, if only in passing, the fallen status of poetry among the arts. He does so in the context of an impassioned 'call to arms' addressed to poets:

poetry may indeed be a lost cause ... but each poet must raise his voice like a pretender's flag. Whether the world falls into the hands of the security forces or the fat-necked speculators, he must get in under his phalanx of words and start resisting.⁵

Poetry's enemies in this depiction are clear: the politically-driven, ideological bullies and the materially obsessed, whose ambitions are the very opposite of poetry's. Despite the apparent hopelessness of poetry's position, the poet must do his or her utmost to preserve the integrity of the art form, because his or her motivation is not gain or power, but faith; as Ezra Pound declared in his *Cantos*, 'the temple is holy / because it is not for sale'.⁶

³ Seamus Heaney, 'Canticles to the Earth: Theodore Roethke', in *Preoccupations: Selected Prose 1968-1978*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1980), 190-194.

⁴ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 190.

⁵ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 217.

⁶ Ezra Pound, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound*, (New York: New Directions, 1986), 676.

Without works, this faith, like any other, is dead; and thus Heaney calls on poets to defend their belief in the art, to resist surrender to the sceptical enemy, by writing poetry that is true to the processes by which it is constituted rather than those of society.⁷ Heaney's own works in this regard are, of course, found in both his poetry and prose, including the essays in *The Government of the Tongue*; and in the latter he begins to argue specifically for the legitimacy of that poetic faith with reference to questions of political, moral and ethical responsibility. In doing so, he returns again and again to a description of poetry's defining characteristic, that aspect of its nature which makes it worthy of fidelity. Paradoxically, it is the very aspect of poetry so offensive to the politician, what Terence Brown calls its 'liberating music' – those untrammelled processes which I have discussed in Chapter 2. In Heaney's second collection of essays, we begin to see the full significance of those operations in relation to poetry's justification as an art form.⁸ He will argue, using one of his most memorable phrases, for 'the efficacy of song itself': that unfettered, unhampered music, he will claim, is more useful to society (counter-intuitive as this might seem) than any politically-charged sentiment or rallying cry.

His intention is clear from the outset of *The Government of the Tongue*, as the essay that serves as an introduction, 'The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov's Cognac and a Knocker', gives shape to the tension between art and socio-political reality. In 1972, Heaney writes, he and a singer friend had a recording session that 'was to promote that happiness and expansiveness which song, meaning both poetry and music, exists to promote in the first place'.⁹ The session, however, was cancelled, because, as they travelled to the studio, a series of bombs went off in the city. Heaney and his companion completed their trip to the studio, but found that – in a description reminiscent of Milosz's in his Nobel lecture¹⁰ – 'the very notion of beginning to sing at that moment when others were beginning to suffer seemed like an offence against their suffering', the

⁷ James 2:20.

⁸ Terence Brown, 'The Witnessing Eye and the Speaking Tongue', in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. E. Andrews, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), 182.

⁹ Heaney, *Government*, xi.

¹⁰ 'An insoluble contradiction appears, a terribly real one, giving no peace of mind either day or night, whatever we call it: it is the contradiction between being and action, or, on another level, a contradiction between art and solidarity with one's fellow men.' (Czeslaw Milosz, *Nobel Lecture*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1982), 11-12.) Heaney's essay was written two years after Milosz won the Nobel Prize.

proverbial instance of Nero's fiddling while Rome burned serving as a striking, albeit apocryphal, image of that offence.¹¹

'Art' is, and has always been, Heaney argues, in apparent conflict with 'Life', or more specifically, 'Song' exists in opposition to 'Suffering'; this struggle is experienced by no one so sharply, so constantly, as the poet, whose obvious allegiance to lived experience, cannot, it sometimes seems, be reconciled with an equally pressing allegiance to art.¹² Poetry's original sin, so to speak, is the transgression of the limitations imposed by reality and by society; the art form recognises no boundaries, no barbed wire or Berlin Wall:

there is a certain jubilation and truancy at the heart of an inspiration. There is a sensation of liberation and abundance which is the antithesis of every hampered and deprived condition. And it is for this reason that, psychologically, the lyric poet feels the need for justification in a world that is notably hampered and deprived.¹³

So important is this conflict to Heaney that it will find further reformulation in 'The Government of the Tongue', as he describes how

that vitality and insouciance of lyric poetry, its relish of its own inventiveness, its pleasuring strain, always comes under threat when poetry remembers that its self-gratification must be perceived as a kind of affront to a world preoccupied with its own imperfections, pains and catastrophes.¹⁴

The guilt of poetry, and indeed sometimes the source of its author's shame, is its inevitable, unstoppable autonomy – and not least the unrestrained impulse that generates it in the first place – in a world characterised by inhibition and responsibility. There are those poets, like Wilfred Owen, Heaney points out, the congruence of whose life and work are beyond the reproach of this accusation. Owen 'represents poetry's solidarity with the doomed, the deprived, the victimized, the under-privileged. The witness is a figure in whom the truth-telling urge and the compulsion to identify with the oppressed

¹¹ Heaney, *Government*, xi.

¹² Heaney, *Government*, xii.

¹³ Heaney, *Government*, xviii.

¹⁴ Heaney, *Government*, 99.

becomes necessarily integral with the act of writing itself'.¹⁵ The 'poet-witness' thus embodies the most direct response to the political accusation: lyric action becomes synonymous with lived action, and poetry, in a sense, becomes politics.

Such instances are, however, rare. Heaney is concerned to defend a far broader conception of poetry – namely, the art form as it incarnates linguistic, phonetic freedom. While the poet-witness is an interesting anomaly who speaks to the full range of poetry's interactions with Life, Heaney finds once again in Osip Mandelstam, another writer born of abnormal circumstances, a more instructive, more widely applicable response to the political accusation; and one which springs from the very commitment to poetry that Heaney himself has been advocating.

Writing his poetry 'in the Stalinist night', as Heaney calls it, Mandelstam was nevertheless able to declare emphatically that 'beauty *is* truth, truth beauty'.¹⁶ While Wilfred Owen had a message to impart, Mandelstam created art for (quite simply) its own sake: for the sake of the words themselves, for the very taste and sound and unhindered movement of them. Mandelstam's faith was in poetry itself, his allegiance to 'all words in their pristine being' – untarnished by euphemism or doctrine or utilitarian ends of any other kind, and representing a response to the charge of politics far more in keeping with Heaney's than Owen's was. In this connection, Heaney coins a phrase that lies at the very heart of his argument.¹⁷ Mandelstam, he writes,

stands for the *efficacy of song itself*, an emblem of the poet as potent sound-wave; and when one thinks of the note of the soprano which cracks glass, one has yet another image of the way purely artistic utterance can put a crack into the officially moulded shape of truth in a totalitarian society.¹⁸

Thus the poet, rather than a witness, is a wave of unadulterated, unchecked sound; or rather, one might argue, he or she becomes a witness not to the authority, the weight, of reality, but to the authority, the forcibleness, of poetry itself. The music that has been so

¹⁵ Heaney, *Government*, xvi.

¹⁶ Heaney, *Government*, xix.

¹⁷ Heaney, *Government*, xx, xix.

¹⁸ Heaney, *Government*, xx (emphasis added). In his Nobel lecture, Heaney asserts this efficacy in another way, speaking of the 'adequacy' of the lyric, which arises from 'the energy released by linguistic fission and fusion ... the buoyancy generated by cadence and tone and rhyme and stanza'. (Seamus Heaney, *Crediting Poetry: The Nobel Lecture*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1996), 51.).

central to Heaney's conception of poetry is now, in a shift characteristic of his stylistic adroitness, not merely music, but 'potent sound-wave'; the emphasis is no longer on the intoxication, the necessary allure of its melodies, but on its acoustic force, its ability to push back against the pressure of the state. Poetry's undeniable social and political effects are a result of its being true to itself – it survives in the extensive and socio-politically efficacious force-field of its own self-sufficiency. By being 'purely artistic utterance' – that is, without even actively seeking a role for itself in this respect (other than the fulfilment of its own nature) – it stands in judgement of the half-truths and lies of totalitarian and much other political discourse as comprehensively as suffering seems to condemn song.¹⁹

For [Mandelstam], obedience to poetic impulse was obedience to conscience; lyric action constituted radical witness ... Mandelstam [bore] witness to the necessity of what he called 'breathing freely', even at the price of his death; to the art of poetry as an unharnessed, non-didactic, non-party-dictated, inspired act.²⁰

The irony is manifest: fidelity to the aesthetic, to art for art's sake, becomes synonymous with ethics.²¹ Furthermore, its ethics are not limited to, and indeed are not concerned with, whatever moral viewpoint there is room to express in the poem at hand (as is the case, for example, in the field of 'ethicism', the ethical criticism of art, which holds that the morality embodied in and the aesthetics of a work of art are critically intertwined).²² The ethical reach of poetry, as conceived of by Heaney, is far wider: it is supremely ethical, he argues, to give a poem over to its aesthetic inclinations. It is like honouring the essential independence of the individual; indeed, the analogy is a real one. The art of poetry, in preserving its own autonomy, is in fact safeguarding the autonomy of the individual subjects in society. Mandelstam, of course, is the extreme exemplar of

¹⁹ In 'Through-Other Place, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain', Heaney puts it bluntly, stating that a poem's power to effect the reader has nothing to do with its 'explicit political concerns and paraphraseable content'. (Seamus Heaney, 'Through-Other Places, Through-Other Times: The Irish Poet and Britain', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 373.)

²⁰ Heaney, *Government*, xix.

²¹ Elsewhere, Heaney writes that "'Art for art's sake" has become a gibe because of an inadequate notion of what art can encompass'. (Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 217.)

²² Berys Gaut, 'The Ethical Criticism of Art', in *Aesthetics and Ethics*, ed. J. Levinson, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 182.

this attitude; he was so convinced of the value of the aesthetic, and so deeply ethical in his poetic considerations, that he was prepared to die as a consequence.

The very qualities of verse, therefore, that would convict it in its trial by Life are, ironically, the qualities that constitute its most powerful defence, and its most powerful influence on our lived experience: its freedom, its buoyancy, its unfettered movement. A further amplification of this idea, beautifully expressed in ‘The Government of the Tongue’, demands quotation:

here is the great paradox of poetry and of the imaginative arts in general. Faced with the brutality of the historical onslaught, they are useless. Yet they verify our singularity, they strike and stake out the ore of self which lies at the base of every individuated life. In one sense the efficacy of poetry is nil – no lyric has ever stopped a tank. In another sense, it is unlimited. It is like the writing in the sand in the face of which accusers and accused are left speechless and renewed ... The drawing of those characters is like poetry, a break from the usual life but not an absconding from it.²³

Hazard Adams, in *The Offense of Poetry*, includes Heaney’s argument among those which claim for poetry what Adams calls ‘an “antithetical” politics’, although this critic does not clearly locate that antithesis, as does Heaney, in poetry’s auditory qualities:

poetry’s potentially ethical nature is part and parcel of its offensiveness, but this ethic cannot be expressed as a message of a set of moral principles or even ultimately in interpretation ... Poetry has a very important social and political dimension, but when it is most clearly perceived, it is often antithetical by its ... nature to social and political fashions ... its offense [in this regard] is the best ground for its defense ...²⁴

The more fully a poem embodies poetry in its auditory essence, the greater its value and truth-telling potential; it was so for Mandelstam, and it is equally so for poets writing in non-totalitarian, democratic societies. Democracy, it is abundantly clear at the turn of the twenty-first century, does not preclude mendacity, the kind of political doublespeak (and consequent social ‘herdspeak’, as Heaney calls it) of which poetry is the polar opposite; and neither does it preclude political atrocities. Heaney acknowledges as much in a 2008

²³ Heaney, *Government*, 107-108.

²⁴ Adams, ix, 3.

interview, stating that ‘the world is reduced by the reduced power of speech in somebody like George W. Bush’.²⁵ Richard Jackson, in his *Writing the War on Terror*, argues that an entirely new, fundamentally delusive discourse has been developed to justify, and to create a public attitude supportive of, the ‘counter-terrorist’ attacks sanctioned by the Bush administration. That discourse is dangerous because it constitutes, Jackson claims, an exercise of power that is inherently abusive, and one which in fact obstructs rather than aids the finding of solutions for political violence. There is thus ‘an urgent need to cross-examine and scrutinise the language of political leaders ... rather than just passively and uncritically absorb it’.²⁶ Poetry, Heaney has argued recently, is one means by which the competence for such critical discernment is nurtured – it constitutes ‘a boost to the capacity for discrimination and resistance’.²⁷ The task of the ‘free’ poet, in a democratic society, is thus precisely what Mandelstam’s was in Stalinist Russia, even if the cost of performing that task is obviously far less for the former than it was for the latter.

In a further paradox, the very need for justification that arises, for the poet, from the jubilation and liberty of his or her art form, is effectively done away with by obedience to the demands of the poem, by a faithful embodiment of that selfsame delight and freedom. This idea finds its most memorable formulation in a passage from an essay first published two years before ‘Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker’:

the only reliable release for the poet [is] the appeasement of the achieved poem. In that liberated moment, when the lyric discovers its buoyant completion, when the timeless formal pleasure comes to its fullness and exhaustion, in those moments of self-justification and self-obliteration the poet makes contact with the place of consciousness where he is at once intensified in his being and detached from his predicaments.²⁸

Heaney is writing here of the kind of consummation that can await the poet as he or she completes his or her particular poem, a sort of epiphany at the end of the creative process; the terms of that epiphany are, it should be noted, wholly aesthetic. Its effects, however,

²⁵ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 382, 196.

²⁶ Richard Jackson, *Writing the War on Terror: Language, Politics and Counterterrorism*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), 1-4.

²⁷ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 381.

²⁸ Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 118.

are psychological and deeply beneficial, as it reconnects the poet with his or her most fundamental self, and opens a space between that self and the dilemmas of daily living. Poetry, in this formulation, is both fulfilment and relief, the satisfaction of something achieved and liberation from something otherwise unresolved.

The art form's first allegiance, then, is to its own processes, but, as Heaney goes on to say, that allegiance does not effectively relieve it or the poet from their duties to society:

the idea of poetry as a symbolic resolution of opposing truths, the idea of the poem as having its existence in a realm separate from the discourse of politics, does not absolve it or the poet from political responsibility ... Yet 'pure' poetry is perfectly justifiable in earshot of the car bomb and it can imply a politics, depending on the nature of the poetry.²⁹

Poets are responsible, both in their life, and in their work, to their political situation; Seamus Heaney's own biography as citizen and writer exemplifies this dual truth. Indeed, in his argument for a poetry that is, as he puts it in 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland', 'neither deliberately provocative nor culpably detached', there is, one critic has noted, 'something of self-justification ... of answering critics who find him evasive or uncertain in the matter of politics or who criticise the well-made poem approach to craft in the face of social upheaval'.³⁰ Heaney's preoccupation with this particular issue is no doubt a reflection of the degree to which he has had to grapple with questions of political duty or 'commitment' in his own life and work.³¹ He, like other poets, 'is stretched between politics and transcendence', between suffering and song, between art and life.³² It is, however, a crude solution to this problem, and a crude idea of political responsibility, to conclude that the poet must therefore write poetry

²⁹ Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 118-119.

³⁰ Seamus Heaney, 'Place and Displacement: Recent Poetry from Northern Ireland', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 133; T.C. Foster, *Seamus Heaney*, (Dublin: The O'Brien Press, 1989), 10.

³¹ One of his poems in this regard, 'Exposure', from 'Singing School', and its handling of the relationship between politics and poetry, are dealt with in Chapter 5.

³² Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 118. Heaney is perhaps aware, in noting this, of an earlier comment by Milosz in his autobiography, expressing his own dilemma as a writer in a time of political chaos: 'I was stretched ... between two poles: the contemplation of a motionless point and the command to participate actively in history; in other words, between transcendence and becoming.' (Czeslaw Milosz, *Native Realm*, (London: Carcanet Press, 1981), 125.)

whose primary purpose is to propagate an ideology or otherwise take sides. Heaney is careful, in the quotation above, to establish that poetry's political nature is a slant one, and one that is neither universally nor necessarily present in the art form. He is in agreement with Eliot on this point, who insists that poetry's worth has nothing to do with any perceived or intended message – the true test of the best poetry is, in fact, that it 'survives ... the complete extinction of interest' in whatever matters, political or social, most concern the writer.³³ Les Murray, too, recognises the potentially powerful, deep-seated effect on us of even 'a poetry woven around ideas we thoroughly disagree with'.³⁴ For Heaney,

a précis of the content, for example, takes no account of the literary echoes and allusions which can be fundamental to its poetic energy. In a poem, words, phrases, cadences and images are linked in to systems of affect and signification which elude the précis-maker. These under-ear activities, as they might be termed, may well constitute the most important business which the poem is up to and are more a matter of the erotics of language than the politics and polemics of the moment.³⁵

The expression 'the erotics of language' is of the essence, and it summarises precisely that force in poetry for which Heaney has been arguing: the inner workings, the independent reproductive power of words and sounds irrespective of socio-political import. As Molino interprets it, Heaney concedes that 'the times demand a poetry commensurate with their social and political upheaval, but the overtly political or propagandistic poem is not the answer'.³⁶ And as Derek Walcott states in *What the Twilight Says*, the consequences of giving poetry over to politics are beneficial to neither party. Writers who allow this are

fascinated with the efficacy of poetry as an aspect of power not through its language but through its subject. Their poetry becomes a kind of musical accompaniment to certain theses, and as history it is forced to exclude certain contradictions, for history cannot be ambiguously recorded.³⁷

³³ Eliot, *On Poetry*, 17.

³⁴ Murray, 342.

³⁵ Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 373.

³⁶ Michael R. Molino, *Questioning Tradition, Language and Myth: The Poetry of Seamus Heaney*, (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 61.

³⁷ Walcott, 59.

Heaney's early responses to the political accusation – which are, characteristically, in keeping with the essence of his later arguments – are, we can now see, an attempt to establish a balance between poetry's crucial independence from the workings of political and social machinery, and its paradoxical ability as a self-gratifying art form to influence those very workings. The poet can never be detached from his or her socio-political environment – 'you cannot distinguish between your condition as a creature of the times and your action as a scribbler', as Heaney puts it.³⁸ But artistic engagement with that environment must take place on poetry's terms, or else the resulting artefact will be both poetically and politically ineffectual.

II

The argument for poetry as an autonomous, self-justifying force, even – indeed especially – in the face of political demands, finds its most refined form in 'The Government of the Tongue', the title essay of Heaney's 1988 collection. The political metaphor which Heaney chooses as a vehicle for that argument is a typically apt one: his artistic loyalty is to the tongue, to poetry, as sovereign, even over the actual affairs of state and nation. As one critic has noted, the Irish writer uses deliberately and persistently legislative terms with reference to poetry throughout the essay, bringing to mind Shelley's 'unacknowledged legislators of the world', that best-known attribution of political and social efficacy to the art form.³⁹ There is also an instructive ambiguity in the title of the essay, however, one which captures the conflict faced, at some point, by most poets: is the tongue governing or being governed? Should the poet relinquish the reins of his or her creative process to poetry itself, to inspiration, or should the political, ethical intellect be used to muzzle the more extravagant – in the original sense of that word – gestures of the art form?

The answer, for Heaney, in 'The Government of the Tongue' – as it has been from the very start of his career – is something of a foregone conclusion; while never

³⁸ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 409.

³⁹ O'Donoghue, *The Language of Poetry*, 136.

failing to acknowledge the real anguish of that conflict in his own life and the lives of all poets, the Irish writer holds to his conviction in poetry's potential as an art form:

when I thought of 'the government of the tongue' as a general title for these lectures, what I had in mind was this aspect of poetry as its own vindicating force. In this dispensation, the tongue (representing both the poet's personal gift of utterance and the common resources of language itself) has been granted the right to govern. The poetic art is credited with an authority of its own. As readers, we submit to the jurisdiction of the achieved form, even though that form is achieved not by dint of the moral and ethical exercise of mind, but by the self-validating operations of what we call inspiration ...⁴⁰

These are by now familiar themes, and the first few pages of the essay are used to restate Heaney's position as it has been collectively represented by the other essays in *The Government of the Tongue*: poetry's autonomy is of the essence, and there is also, in this passage, a nod to the responsibility of the poet to grant poetry that autonomy. Only then will poetry act upon the reader, who, whether consciously or not, recognises and defers to the persuasive force of the imagination at work; in fact, the implication is that the reader will succumb more completely to the poem's laws and judgements if their source is internal rather than external to it, in the form of moral or ethical considerations. This is affirmed later in the essay, as Heaney extends the metaphor above, referring to 'interference by the knowing intellect in the purely disinterested cognitions of the form-seeking imagination'. Such interference is 'poetic sabotage, an affront to the legislative and executive powers of expression itself'.⁴¹ Michael Keneally makes an important point about the connotations of the word 'jurisdiction' as Heaney uses it in this essay: 'a poet's achievement is not merely exemplary but in some sense directive'. Poetry, as Heaney himself will later argue, does not simply provide a picture of how things could or should be; it makes things happen, through the processes of inspiration and imagination.⁴²

Demonstrating again his unerring ability to select quotations and concepts from the work of others that not only complement, but amplify his own argument, Heaney proceeds to define inspiration in the terms of the Polish poet Anna Swir. Swir describes it as 'a psychosomatic phenomenon', and she goes on:

⁴⁰ Heaney, *Government*, 92.

⁴¹ Heaney, *Government*, 93.

⁴² McDonald, 'Seamus Heaney as Critic', 176.

this seems to me the only biologically natural way for a poem to be born and gives the poem something like a biological right to exist. A poet becomes then an antenna capturing the voices of the world, a medium expressing his own subconscious and the collective subconscious. For one moment he possesses wealth usually inaccessible to him, and he loses it when that moment is over.⁴³

Swir, like Heaney, believes in a poetry which is genetic to the human being, which has a constitutive right to continued existence. Inspiration as described here is both a mental and a physical event, an interaction between mind and body involving ear, eye and heartbeat as well as imagination. Swir's definition is in line with Heaney's conception of poetry as encompassing at once mind and body, as both earthly and transcendent, both carnal and spiritual. In fact, given the similarities between what Heaney refers to as 'inspiration' here and his description of the auditory imagination in previous essays, I would suggest that the two concepts are more or less equivalent; or, rather, that the workings of the auditory imagination are essential to the occurrence of inspiration. Both have to do with the operations of the subconscious and the interplay between the physical and emotional in the course of writing. Heaney's insistence on the fundamentally natural origins of poetry is also echoed in Swir's references to its emergence or birth. *The Waste Land*, the example with which Heaney opens this particular essay, is an exemplary product of inspiration in that parts of it (Part V, 'What The Thunder Said', in particular) seem to have sprung fully-formed from Eliot's subconscious, their genesis governed only, and unpredictably, by the tongue.

Having taken up his usual weapons – albeit newly reinforced by various quotations – and having rearticulated his position on the matter of poetry and politics, Heaney enters into the conflict anew. The importance of 'The Government of the Tongue' is not only the judicious and richly connotative metaphor it provides for an argument by now well established; even more than that, the essay is significant for its statement of the relationship that Heaney believes must exist between social reality and poetry. While the voices to which Heaney responds are still those of the politician and the ideologue, he here adumbrates the greater, more encompassing accusatory presence which takes shape in *The Redress of Poetry*: reality itself.

⁴³ Qtd in Heaney, *Government*, 93.

In its socio-political form, that reality poses a threat to the imagination, as Heaney conceives of it, the hazard of a foreign, contaminating set of political or social imperatives finding their way into the fragile, balanced ecosystem of the poetic process (and, to extend the metaphor, infecting that ecosystem until all that is most innately poetic about it has been consumed). Poetry, however, if its independence holds, if it remains unpolluted by political ends, is of ultimate, real benefit to society. Its more essential purpose, in fact, is to elucidate, as Robert Frost famously points out, the dilemmas and difficulties, the confusions and pressures of life. The means to that elucidation, as described by Frost, are clearly those of pure, uninhibited poetic process: 'it begins in delight, it inclines to the impulse, it assumes direction with the first line laid down, it runs a course of lucky events and ends in a clarification of life'.⁴⁴ This description evinces, not least, the delightfully serendipitous manner in which song becomes efficacious: in obeying the urge of its own pleasure, in seeking the gratification of its own processes, it results in something of tremendous and extensive value, going far beyond a pretty melody. The imagination becomes helpful in the manner (although with none of the quiet gravity – on the contrary) of a white-coated psychologist, possessing a measure of autonomy, a 'disinterested gaze' as Heaney often calls it, that the patient, in the grip of neuroses or other mental obsessions, lacks.⁴⁵ That autonomy, that engagement with difficulty which nonetheless remains reliant on independent energies and processes, provides the imagination-psychologist with an Archimedean lever – and results in poetry that is 'a process of self-healing', or, as he puts it elsewhere, a poetry akin to 'the intervention of a healer or a doctor or a prayer'.⁴⁶ For this very reason, Heaney argues, the poet should view the imagination as 'a shaping spirit which it is wrong to disobey'.⁴⁷

The paradoxical importance of poetry's absolute independence to its relevance in our lives – an aspect of Heaney's argument well-stated in many of his earlier essays –

⁴⁴ Qtd in Heaney, *Government*, 95.

⁴⁵ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 382, 383.

⁴⁶ Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 133; Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 388. Heaney himself uses the mythological image of the original Archimedean lever in *The Place of Writing*, in which he speaks of distance – the length of the lever needed to move the world – as being the 'enabling factor' in much Northern Irish art. (Seamus Heaney, 'The Pre-Natal Mountain: Vision and Irony in Recent Irish Poetry', in *The Place of Writing*, (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989), 46.)

⁴⁷ Heaney, *Government*, 95. Heaney first designates the imagination as this spirit in 'Belfast', where he speaks of the poet being faithful to his or her own 'sensibility'. Not to do so is 'a sin against the imagination'. (Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 34.)

takes on, at this point in 'The Government of the Tongue', a broader significance: 'just as the poem, in the process of its own genesis, exemplifies a congruence between impulse and right action, so in its repose the poem gives us a premonition of harmonies desired and not inexpensively achieved.'⁴⁸ The emphasis here is not overtly political; on the contrary, it is very deliberately a-political, not in the sense of excluding the political but rather in the sense of surpassing it in scope. Poetry's far more comprehensive reach is confirmed as Heaney goes on:

in this way, the order of art becomes an achievement intimating a possible order beyond itself, although its relation to that further order remains promissory rather than obligatory. Art is not an inferior reflection of some ordained heavenly system but a rehearsal of it in earthly terms; art does not trace the given map of a better reality but improvises an inspired sketch of it.⁴⁹

This is a turning-point in the development of Heaney's defence, and, both in its expressive style and its claims for the art, constitutes one of his most significant statements; as we might expect, the image he settles on for art's relationship to reality, that of a rough drawing, is wholly appropriate to and evocative of the very specific association he wants to describe. Poetry does not imitate life, therefore necessarily being a poorer version of that life; instead, with the chalk and crayon of reality as we know it, poetry drafts a different way of life, suggests a possible reality which is recognisably composed of actual materials, but which is nonetheless an improvement on our daily experience. Crucially, such art is neither the guarantee of a better reality, nor a fantastic, anchorless ship of wish-fulfilment; the ropes between the real and the artistic are fine, and woven in a very particular way from a mixture of poetic and experiential substance, but they are, or should be, unbreakably strong.

Over a decade later, in an essay about Robert Burns, we find Heaney – ever-consistent in his beliefs – describing that phenomenon once more:

I think ... that we can prefigure a future by reimagining our pasts. In poetry, however, this prefiguring is venturesome and suggestive, more like a melodic promise than a social programme. It is not like the blueprint for a better world which might spring from the mind of a social engineer. Rather, it arises from the

⁴⁸ Heaney, *Government*, 93-94.

⁴⁹ Heaney, *Government*, 94.

cravings of the spirit as expressed in language, in all those patiences and impatiences which language embodies.⁵⁰

The consolation offered by poetry is not that of a formula for the future, whether that of the reformer or social worker. Rather, it offers us a promise of possible satisfaction, of potential completeness. Foster paraphrases Heaney as suggesting that poetry will ‘find its own route, its own logic, by which it will discover its own solutions’ – solutions which will be markedly different from those proposed by the politician or activist.⁵¹ Paz, in ‘The Other Voice’, describes poetry as ‘a model of what human society might be’; and while this description contains elements of Heaney’s above – most especially the expression, through poetry, of a potential, a better society – it also reveals, by contrast, the acutely discerning sensibility with which the Irish writer selects his images.⁵² Paz’s ‘model’ implies a degree of detail, of specificity, which is more obviously present in the ‘blueprint’ of the social engineer, in Heaney’s description, than in the rough drawing or musical token of the poet.

This, then, is the zenith of Heaney’s argument in *The Government of the Tongue*, and it is also the peak from which he will launch himself into an argument for the redress of poetry in the collection of that name. But what, Heaney asks at this point in the essay, of the other possible implication of his ambiguous title?

As I warm to this theme, a voice from another part of me speaks in rebuke. ‘Govern your tongue,’ it says, compelling me to remember that my title can also imply a *denial* of the tongue’s autonomy and permission. In this reading, ‘the government of the tongue’ is full of monastic and ascetic strictness.⁵³

Heaney is well acquainted with one version of this curtailment of the tongue’s freedom, a limit introduced, as we have seen, by political or social pressures. In such circumstances (and his exemplars here do not include himself), poetry finds itself relegated to minor status, if any. The urgent and diagrammatic requirements of the crisis at hand, which inevitably do not include any artistic endeavour, become all-consuming to society and its

⁵⁰ Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 352.

⁵¹ Foster, 10.

⁵² Paz, 158.

⁵³ Heaney, *Government*, 96.

individuals. In such cases, the truth and authority of poetry become ‘secondary to religious truth or state security or public order’:

it discloses a condition of public and private repressions where the undirected hedonistic play of imagination is regarded at best as luxury or licentiousness, at worst as heresy or treason ... In such contexts, no further elaboration or exploration of the language or forms currently in place is permissible.⁵⁴

Poets living in these conditions – ‘ideal republics, Soviet republics, in the Vatican and Bible-belt’ – are expected to allow their tongues to be governed by dogma; when they do not, their liberated, freely inspired poetry becomes a different kind of government, another possible allegiance.⁵⁵ Heaney implies, as he has before, that the ungoverned tongue is as potentially dangerous, to the dictator or state that would govern it, as a rebel force might be. His interests here, however, lie with less forcefully stifling situations, in which a writer might choose to shackle his or her own tongue, to view some topics as appropriate and others as not. It is not always the case, Heaney argues, that the art produced in such situations is necessarily the poorer for it. He goes on to cite the example of George Herbert, who, although he submitted his tongue to his Christian beliefs, managed by virtue of his musical sensibility – rather than the unchanged efficacy of poetry subjected to external demands – to produce a poetry that was nonetheless sincere and persuasive. Another example is found in T.S. Eliot, one of the Irish writer’s masters, who, while writing *Four Quartets*, subjected the previously self-governing tongue to the control of philosophical and religious truth. Heaney does not dismiss the product of that decision as lesser art, and neither does he attribute the poem’s integrity to Eliot’s temperament, as he does with Herbert. But in his description of the central governor of the *Quartets* as functioning ‘like a sorrowful *grand seigneur*, meditatively, authoritatively, yet just a little wistfully aware of its lost vitality and insouciance’, he implies that those poems are, indeed, lacking in some necessary and gratifying life-force.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Heaney, *Government*, 96.

⁵⁵ Heaney, *Government*, 96-97.

⁵⁶ Heaney, *Government*, 97-99.

Such poetry is not always impoverished; but those cases in which it is not are, it would seem, few and far between. While Heaney would concede that the governed tongue can produce genuine, stirring poetry, he delimits the contexts in which this is possible to those determined by a kind of luck, by disposition, by factors removed from the creative act itself. The example of George Herbert in ‘The Government of the Tongue’ is like that of Wilfred Owen as poet-witness in ‘The Interesting Case of Nero, Chekhov’s Cognac and a Knocker’: they constitute a fair acknowledgement, by Heaney, that there are exceptions to the rules he is at such pains to establish; but those exceptions have little useful bearing on the situation at large. It hardly needs to be added that he is not denying poets the possibility of (fervent) political and religious affiliation – his own clear political alignment and erstwhile Catholic belief in no way dilute the power of his poetry. Rather, he cautions poets not to allow those loyalties to dominate their writing, to govern their tongues in such a way as to interfere with the autonomous operations of the imagination.

And so with this caveat, Heaney’s argument is restated: the best poetry, the truest poetry, is possible only when it issues from a tongue ungoverned by state, religion or the meddling intellect. By way of demonstration, Heaney quotes a poem by Zbigniew Herbert entitled ‘A Knocker’, which it is appropriate to reproduce here:

There are those who grow
gardens in their heads
paths lead from their hair
to sunny and white cities

it’s easy for them to write
they close their eyes
immediately schools of images
stream down from their foreheads

my imagination
is a piece of board
my sole instrument
is a wooden stick

I strike the board
it answers me
yes – yes

no – no

for others the green bell of a tree
the blue bell of water
I have a knocker
from unprotected gardens

I thump on the board
and it prompts me
with the moralist's dry poem
yes – yes
no – no

Ostensibly, Heaney argues, this poem is a statement against the freedom of the lyric, its self-delighting absorption in seeking its own fulfilment. The Polish poet seems to want to replace such poetry's intoxicating imagery and sound with a language as literal, as direct, as 'yes' and 'no' – moral discourse, in short. The tongue, this poem insists, should be governed, should be constrained as severely as possible. It achieves its effect, however, through distinctly lyrical means, through what Heaney calls 'the fluent evocation of bells and gardens and trees', without which the knocker would forfeit its symbolic force.

The poem makes us feel that we should prefer moral utterance to palliative imagery, but it does exactly that, makes us *feel*, and by means of feeling carries truth alive into the heart – exactly as the Romantics said it should. We end up persuaded we are against lyric poetry's culpable absorption in its own process by an entirely successful instance of that very process in action: here is a lyric about a knocker which claims that lyric is inadmissible.⁵⁷

Even in asserting the government of the tongue, Herbert undermines his own stated intention. In light of this victory, this supremacy of the tongue that ungoverns itself even as it seeks to submit to government, Heaney goes on to offer a further articulation of his poetic credo. The essential nature of poetry and its possible effects, as he sees them, remain unchanged, no matter how individual poets choose to resolve the conflict between art and life – whether by defeating that conflict through their lived experience, like Wilfred Owen, or by outdistancing it altogether, like Zbigniew Herbert:

⁵⁷ Heaney, *Government*, 99-100.

the fact is that poetry is its own reality and no matter how much a poet may concede to the corrective pressures of social, moral, political and historical reality, the ultimate fidelity must be to the demand and promise of the artistic event.⁵⁸

The tension between art and life, between poetry and socio-political reality, is clearly not to be denied. But that tension lies in the fact that, as Heaney affirms, 'poetry is its own reality'. And this, too, cannot be gainsaid. If the art form owes a primary allegiance to anything, it is to that which lies at its very roots and indeed the source of its very being at all. It is inextricably linked with the reality of our world, but it has all the rights and responsibilities of being its own independent reality – of being *sui generis* – and if it fails to establish itself as such then it fails as poetry. Perhaps every poet feels obligated at one time or another, if only through a guilty conscience, to dance to the tune of the state or church or social majority. At all times, however, he or she must remain faithful to a different reality, that of poetry (which, as Heaney has implied all along, is not politics, not religion, not sociology, but itself), and bow instead to the liberating pressure exerted by the imagination and the ungoverned tongue.

The general point bears further emphasis. Socio-political reality, defined by the demand for a particular kind of action, and the reality of poetry, characterised by another sort of action altogether, could be said to constitute an example of what Isaiah Berlin calls, in 'The Originality of Machiavelli', 'two conflicting systems of value'.⁵⁹ According to Berlin's reading, Machiavelli's writing about the impossibility of uniting Christian goals with political ones establishes 'a differentiation between two incompatible ideals of life'. The politician wishing to embrace Christianity is doomed to political failure, for the virtues of Christianity are simply irreconcilable with those of government.⁶⁰

Machiavelli's crucial achievement is ... his uncovering of an insoluble dilemma ... It stems from his *de facto* recognition that ends equally ultimate, equally sacred, may contradict each other, that entire systems of value may come into collision without possibility of rational arbitration, and that not merely in exceptional circumstances, as a result of abnormality or accident or error ... but ... as part of the normal human situation.⁶¹

⁵⁸ Heaney, *Government*, 101.

⁵⁹ Isaiah Berlin, 'The Originality of Machiavelli', in *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 58.

⁶⁰ Berlin, 45, 47.

⁶¹ Berlin, 74-75.

Heaney might well have argued (via Machiavelli) that of course poetry is going to need a defence, because in its own activity it implicitly and sometimes explicitly embodies a set of values, a set of goals, above all a set of operations, which are wholly opposed to the values demanded by the aims of political and social betterment. It is, as Adams asserts, the very antithesis of those values.⁶² In a recent interview, Heaney offers a contemporary example of how this is so:

if you are an Israeli or Palestinian poet at this moment, what poetry ideally requires of you is a disinterested gaze at how you are situated, whereas your people will require passionate solidarity, and opposition to the Other. The same situation prevailed in Northern Ireland in a diminished way: Protestants, Catholics, nationalists, Unionists, are you with us or against us?⁶³

In short, the domains of poetry and politics represent primary concerns that are incommensurable with each other, and thus conflict between them is inescapable, only rarely reconcilable – as in those exceptional circumstances exemplified by Wilfred Owen writing during World War I. In all other cases, the political poet can, like Machiavelli's Christian officeholder, either be an effective poet, or an effective propagandist, but not both. A still further articulation of the same idea can be found in J.P. Ward's *Poetry and the Sociological Idea*:

I want to suggest that poetry not only is not, but could not possibly have been, compatible with the sociological idea. That is to say, the very nature of the poetry in each case, what constitutes it as poetry and makes us want to call it that, is precisely that in it which strains away from the sociological idea and the sociality of language ...⁶⁴

The governed tongue is a problem precisely because it is an attempt to reconcile one set of values with another, to unite poetry with the idea of a mutually responsible social machine – whose responsibility is defined in very particular ways. As such, it is a

⁶² Adams, 3.

⁶³ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 383.

⁶⁴ J.P. Ward, *Poetry and the Sociological Idea*, (New Jersey: The Harvester Press, 1981), 25. By the 'sociological idea', Ward means the idea that society exists as an entity, and that all our behaviour is governed by that entity; we are defined, and motivated, by our interactions with each other as members of a social body.

betrayal of what Heaney states has to be, first and last, the writer's final object of faith, 'the artistic event'.⁶⁵ None of this is to say, of course, that the imagination rejects or is necessarily hostile to social reality itself; Heaney has gone to memorable lengths to illustrate that those two entities are intertwined, to the greater effect of poetry. The hierarchy of that relationship, however, must be maintained by the poet during the act of writing: poetic obligation must precede political obligation.

This, then, becomes the binary which poetry cannot but struggle to unite in a balanced whole: its own liberated operation and the very clearly circumscribed transactions of the political. Poetry can be political in all kinds of ways, Heaney argues – by uncovering paradigms, by offering through its own means a promise of change, by providing an example of truth-telling – but those ways are, by and large, not the categorical, unequivocal mechanisms of the apparatus.⁶⁶

As artists, then, Heaney requires that we should have faith – he uses the term once more – in poetry's 'absolutely absolved necessity', a necessity 'absolved' in the sense of its not requiring justification. Value systems external to those of the lyric should not be permitted to affect its fundamental efficacy by imposing themselves upon the creative act.⁶⁷ In an interview with Seamus Deane, Heaney describes poetry and politics as distinct ways of speaking, of giving coherence: 'poetry and politics are, in different ways, an articulation, an ordering, a giving of form to inchoate pieties, prejudices, world-views'.⁶⁸ The difference between these approaches is always in danger of being conflated or otherwise collapsed – and always in one direction. This state of affairs is complicated in contemporary society because, in the twentieth and now twenty-first centuries more than ever, the predominance of politics, indeed the pre-eminence of it, is often taken as given and vehemently asserted as such. Ihab Hassan deplores 'the prevalence of politics, the obsession with power, the unrelieved pressure of both in the university', which 'skew

⁶⁵ Oscar Wilde doubtless intends more or less the same thing in the preface to *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, when he states baldly that 'No artist has ethical sympathies. An ethical sympathy in an artist is an unpardonable mannerism of style.' (Oscar Wilde, 'Preface', in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, (New York: Dover Publications, 1993), vii.)

⁶⁶ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 380-383.

⁶⁷ Heaney, *Government*, 100.

⁶⁸ Foster, 70.

our language, thought, values' by diminishing 'all existence to ... political facts'.⁶⁹

Heaney, like so many other twentieth-century poets, has felt convicted by his resistance to this notion – not only by his conscience but also by the strictures of his critics and countrymen. He has lived, in short, all the contradictions that can exist between poetry and politics (or being and action, as Milosz would term them) and his words here and elsewhere come weighted with the conflicted loyalties of his own life and experience.

It is perhaps that lived experience that prompts Heaney, as he concludes 'The Government of the Tongue', to assert once more that poetry is neither merely a reflection of life nor a kind of escapism:

in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.⁷⁰

Poetry opens up a space, otherwise non-existent, between the future and our own desires for that future, a future which it neither predicts nor confirms nor imitates. Its purpose, as described by Heaney here, is to provide a moment allowing meditation of something outside of our lived reality and our ideal reality, but attuned to both. Functioning in this way, poetry is not a means of escape. Rather, it is an instance of intense, unwavering, unprejudiced focus. The poem is not just a mirror but more like a magnifying glass; and the light it concentrates is turned back on us, not to burn, but to illuminate. Thus concentrated, our minds and hearts are liberated. Such is Heaney's faith.

I have discussed, in this chapter, Heaney's conception of the ways in which poetry, by virtue of its own unhindered operations, resists, specifically, the pressures imposed by politics. But poetry faces, as his argument in 'The Government of the Tongue' has implied and as we shall further see, a perhaps more obdurate foe than the demands of the political – a foe to which Heaney turns in the most comprehensive statement of his defence of poetry. This shift in focus, as his career proceeds, is not surprising; the claims of politics on poetry are not omnipresent, nor are war and civil

⁶⁹ Ihab Hassan, 'Negative Capability Reclaimed: Literature and Philosophy *contra* Politics', in *Literature and Philosophy: Yearbook of Research in English and American Literature*, ed. H. Grabes, (Stuttgart: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1997), 49-50, 64.

⁷⁰ Heaney, *Government*, 108.

conflict (as in Northern Ireland) never-ending. The claims and demands of reality itself – what he calls the ‘actual’ – are, however; and it is against the burden of those claims that Heaney seeks to balance the poetic act in *The Redress of Poetry*.

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Chapter 4

Heaney's Defence of Poetry III: *The Redress of Poetry*

So when the phrase 'the redress of poetry' swam up, I myself was aswim with intimations of possibility. I suddenly realised that I could talk about poetry as something hung out on the imaginative arm of the scales to balance or redress the burden of the actual and the endured. I don't mean as a compensation or consolation, more as a comprehension, a comprehension which has to be its own reward.

Seamus Heaney, interview by Dennis O'Driscoll¹

I

The centripetal force exerted by the title essay in *The Redress of Poetry* is such that it is difficult to discuss any one of the lectures reproduced in the collection without reference to that pivotal text. The title essay brings together ideas explored in its accompanying essays, and is in fact a kind of summation, albeit pre-dating the rest in actual composition. Because this is so, I will in a sense be working backwards, starting with the partial articulation in later essays of some of the ideas brought into so potent a culmination in the title essay itself. In this way, we can trace a path through the other essays in the collection to the one that not only begins, but crowns them all.

Heaney's writing about poetry, and about the processes involved in making and reading it, is characterised by an insistence on the vitality of the art form, the various forms of energy which it both harnesses and creates. The craft is contrasted to all that is impotent, all that is inactive, and becomes, in Heaney's framework, not merely an exemplum of vitality, but a source of renewal. In *The Redress of Poetry* and occasional essays of the same period, Heaney comes to consider that power both as it exceeds our expectations and limitations, and, crucially, as it balances out against the real. The excess of poetry, as we will see, is the very means by which it is able to accumulate the critical mass necessary to achieve that balance; or, to put it another way, its abundant, limitless energy provides poetry with sufficient uplift to transcend, and thus counterbalance reality.

Heaney's opponent in these essays is no longer predominantly political in nature, although his concerns in that regard are a lasting feature of his prose; rather, he considers

¹ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 431.

poetry's adequacy, its equivalent weight, to the burden of reality in all its forms. Evidence of this new tendency in his argument can be found in his 1991 essay 'Extending the Alphabet: On Christopher Marlowe's "Hero and Leander"', in which he speaks not of poetry's answer to politics, but rather 'poetry's answer to the world'. That answer is composed, as ever, not of politically-based and popular sentiment, but of the auditory elements that, for Heaney, are the very substance of poetry's power, the elements that trigger a kind of internal poetic fission, an endless chain reaction of associations and sounds producing a seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy.²

Poetry of this sort – that irradiates both reader and poet with its potent spillover – is not only pleasurable, but healthful, we are led to believe, and in the deepest sense. It provides 'a kind of homeopathic benefit' for the reader, a benefit inseparable, Heaney emphasises yet again, from the poem's harmonious properties. Experiencing 'an exuberant rhythm, a display of metrical virtuosity, some rising intellectual ground successfully surmounted' appeases and 'further[s] the range of the mind's and the body's pleasures, and helps the reader to obey the old command ... Know thyself'.³ As has been the case with Heaney's other examples, the movement here is from sound to spirit, from pleasure to perception. As we read poetry and as we respond to its phonetic form, above all, we find, as Heaney states in an essay on Yeats and Larkin from the same period, that our minds are able, in the Brodskian sense, to reach 'a new plane of regard', a broader, more comprehensively perceptive range for their activities. One of the consequences of that widened scope is the uncovering of that within us which is both deeply familiar and yet deeply strange, or, as Heaney puts it, poetry grants us the 'foreknowledge of certain things which we already seem to be remembering'.⁴

There is more to Heaney's use of that key phrase from Brodsky at this stage in his defence, however, than simply a reiteration of past lines of argument, and in the same essay on Yeats and Larkin, he considers a further implication inherent in the notion of a 'new plane': poetry's ability not only to extend the boundaries of our (self-)perception, but its suggestion of another way of being altogether. Through poetry, we are not simply

² Seamus Heaney, 'Extending the Alphabet: On Christopher Marlowe's "Hero and Leander"', in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 25.

³ Heaney, *Redress*, 37.

⁴ Seamus Heaney, 'Joy or Night: Last Things in the Poetry of W.B. Yeats and Philip Larkin', in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, (London: Faber & Faber), 159-160.

better able to see and comprehend ourselves and our lives, but, Heaney suggests, we are assured of the worth of life itself, and simultaneously privileged with the premonition of an alternative to our daily experience. Yeats' 'The Cold Heaven', he states,

suggests that there is an overall purpose to life; and it does so by the intrinsically poetic action of its rhymes, its rhythms, and its exultant intonation. These create an energy and an order which promote the idea that there exists a much greater, circumambient energy and order within which we have our being.⁵

A great poem, by possessing inherently the characteristics – order, energy, structure and yet freedom – of a transcendent system, becomes a promise, an adumbration in itself of that system. One is reminded of the New Testament assertion, in the 'Letter to the Romans', that in the operations of nature lies proof of the operations of God; and, indeed, Heaney's last sentence here could be used appropriately to describe what all religions themselves do. In *Stepping Stones*, he summarises this memorably by stating that 'poetry is a ratification of the impulse towards transcendence'.⁶

Heaney's terminology, the very thrust of his argument here and elsewhere, is in fact distinctive in its religious implication, its insistence on faith of some kind in what Heaney has described as 'an agnostic time' – a phrase with both metaphorical and literal resonance.⁷ In terms of his recurring image of poetry as a religious force, our age is agnostic in its uncertainty about or downright hostility to the art form as a legitimate means of expression, as valuable and memorable speech. The literal meaning of 'agnostic', however, is also applicable: the demise of poetry has much to do with the gradual disappearance of God from popular thought. Ours is, according to Les Murray, 'an age which distrusts "mystical" talk and prefers to dissemble its spiritual needs'.⁸ With the unpopularity of the spiritual within critical and intellectual discourse has come a reluctance to credit poetry, or any art, with the ability to transcend the actual. The craft that Wordsworth described as 'the first and last of all knowledge', a source of revelation and prophecy, is no longer viewed as a vehicle for any truth at all, let alone ultimate

⁵ Heaney, *Redress*, 149.

⁶ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 470.

⁷ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 217.

⁸ Murray, 342-343.

truth.⁹ Elaine Scarry, in her argument for the usefulness of beauty in *On Beauty and Being Just*, laments the ‘banishing of [conversation about] beauty from the humanities’ in the last three decades, and George Steiner, ten years before Scarry, describes our awkwardness in discussing the transcendent in art. To acknowledge what is otherworldly about ‘art, music and literature is to risk the whole gamut of muddle and embarrassment’, he writes.¹⁰ Our age is agnostic with reference to the metaphysical in any shape, and the rejection of the spiritual in its most profound form cannot but affect our attitude to its other possible manifestations. Heaney, as both poet and critic, is singular in his unembarrassed emphasis on what is holy (a word he is not loath to use), and his ready recourse to terms like ‘the soul’.¹¹ One reviewer’s comment on *Seeing Things* is perhaps even more remarkably true of his prose: ‘what Heaney has done ... is to reinvigorate poetry with a religious element that has diminished in Western Art since the Enlightenment. He has rekindled the *numinous*.’¹² Peter McDonald in fact suggests that Heaney eschews critical-theoretical discourses for this very reason: they cannot provide him with a language adequate to the kinds of claims he makes for poetry.¹³ Certainly, the terms ‘transcendent’ and ‘soul’ do not, to my knowledge, feature in any theoretical vocabulary.

The kind of poetry that intimates the existence of some greater system, that implies an ultimate reason for being, and thus in a sense defends that being, is, to use Milosz’s words, inherently ‘on the side of life’. The Polish poet believed, equally, that there was a poetry that failed in this regard, exemplified for him by Philip Larkin’s ‘Aubade’.

Perhaps we forget too easily the centuries-old mutual hostility between reason, science and science-inspired philosophy on the one hand and poetry on the other? Perhaps the author of the poem went over to the side of the adversary and his ratiocination strikes me as a betrayal? For, after all, death in the poem is endowed

⁹ William Wordsworth, ‘Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, with Pastoral and Other Poems (‘1802’), in *Poems*, vol. 1, ed. J. O. Hayden, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977), 881.

¹⁰ Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 57; George Steiner, *Real Presences*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1989), 178.

¹¹ As, for example, in his essay on Marlowe, in which he quotes, and then elaborates on, Brodsky’s assertion that ‘intonation in a poem ... stands for the motion of the soul’. (Heaney, *Redress*, 33.)

¹² Darcy O’Brien, ‘Ways of *Seeing Things*’, in *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*, ed. C. Malloy and P. Carey, (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), 187.

¹³ McDonald, *Serious Poetry*, 87.

with the supreme authority of Law and universal necessity, while man is reduced to nothing, to a bundle of perceptions, or even less, to an interchangeable statistical unit. But poetry by its very essence has always been on the side of life. Faith in life everlasting has accompanied man in his wanderings through time, and it has always been larger and deeper than religious or philosophical creeds which expressed only one of its forms.¹⁴

Undeniably, these words of Milosz are imbued with the writer's Roman Catholicism. There is no objective reason why, for secular men and women, Larkin's 'Aubade' might not be regarded as a great poem – indeed *the* great poem of recent times on the especial unmitigated dread that death holds for secular humankind. But poetry, Milosz implies here, achieves in some almost primordial sense what religion and philosophy try to achieve in more systematic ways: the ultimate, unlimited expression of a belief in eternity, in eternal meaning. Heaney, on the other hand, while arguing for poetry's transcendent implications, interprets its disposition always to advocate life as established by something far more fundamental than its attitude to death. 'When a poem rhymes', he states, 'when a new form generates, when a metre provokes consciousness into new postures, it is already on the side of life'. When we are startled by a rhyme, in other words, by the way in which it augments meaning, a challenge to the necessity represented by death is already taking place; poetic language thus becomes the very embodiment of life itself, choosing, in fact, 'the condition of overlife', and exceeding the usual limits of our being.¹⁵

Baranczak suggests a similar idea in his essay "The Revenge of a Mortal Hand" when he says of the act of writing that

it results mainly from the deliberate breaking of a taboo, from defiant resistance against a powerful rule or law, from rebellion against the commonly accepted foundations of existence. It's enough to put a verse line down on paper to scoff, in effect, at all the basic laws on which the world rests. For the very act of writing creates another world in which all those laws can be suspended – more, held in suspension interminably by the enduring power of conceit, rhyme, pun, metaphor, meter.¹⁶

¹⁴ Qtd in Heaney, *Redress*, 158.

¹⁵ Heaney, *Redress*, 158. Elsewhere, Heaney asserts that 'in poetry, enough is never enough' – 'to find its true measure, creative talent must exert itself beyond the limit'. (Heaney, *Redress*, 121.)

¹⁶ Baranczak, 242.

The Polish writer's remarks neatly echo Heaney's emphasis in his essay on Yeats and Larkin – on the way in which poetry, through its intrinsic processes, suggests a different kind of, a more abundant, existence. We see, too, that his focus at this point in his defence is no longer only on the inward reach of poetry, its power to rouse our subconscious, but on its movement beyond that subconscious, its capacity to surpass not merely our personal limitations but those of the world itself.

This potential of the art form is thoroughly explored in an essay entitled 'Above the Brim: On Robert Frost', in which Heaney describes how a poem produced by the governing tongue is able to 'launch itself beyond skill and ego into a run of energy that brim[s] up outside the poet's conscious intention and control'.¹⁷ That burst of energy is unpredictable to both poet and reader in its intensity:

there is nothing determined about the reach of poetry, either for the writer or the reader of it: it is, as Keats said, a matter of surprise by fine excess, what Robert Frost calls in 'Birches' a going above the brim, a getting away from the earth awhile in order to come back and begin over.¹⁸

This apparent release from gravity is not, Heaney is concerned to point out, either sheer escapism or the consequence only of a poetry motivated by joy or profound pleasure. Using Robert Frost as an example, he makes it clear that one of the primary sources of such energy is, in fact, the confrontation of misery or suffering. The elevation attained by Frost's poetry, on the contrary, is often enough occasioned by the 'sheer unhappiness of the uncomposed world'. Pain is the force which enables Frost to take off:

when Frost comes down hard upon the facts of hurt, he still manages to end up gaining poetic altitude. As his intelligence thrusts down, it creates a reactive force capable of raising and carrying the whole burden of our knowledge and experience.¹⁹

Heaney is able to divine, in the American writer, something like a poetic version of Newton's Third Law: for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. With reference to Frost's 'Home Burial', he writes that the extent of the poem's ascent is

¹⁷ Seamus Heaney, 'Above the Brim: On Robert Frost', in *Salmagundi* 88-89 (Fall 1990/Winter 1991), 278.

¹⁸ Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 356.

¹⁹ Heaney, 'Above the Brim', 284-285.

directly proportionate to the pressure it exerts against the actual – the harder that Frost presses down upon the events of the poem, and the more painful they become, the greater the power of that poem to surmount its own occasion. In the case of a great poet, the more unyielding the facts of reality, the greater is the ability of his or her imagination to propel itself beyond them, like the swimmer who is able to use the very resistance offered by the water to propel him or herself to greater speed.²⁰

Just as this upward movement itself is not necessarily the buoyancy of joy (no matter how delightful the energy, the music of the poem may be), so its result is not one of fleeting pleasure or amusement, either. Rather, that upward surge, achieved by the recoil of the poem as it comes into contact with our lived experience, is capable of lifting that experience ‘to a new, refreshing plane’. And thus we come to the central component of Heaney’s defence as it finds its most sophisticated expression in ‘The Redress of Poetry’. Heaney’s preoccupation, in this collection, is with poetry’s abundant energy – a consequence not least of its sound – which carries us, along with our doubts and dilemmas, to a place which transcends the actual, permitting not only a clearer view of our actualities but the glimpse of an alternative experience. And, paradoxically, the primary purpose of poetry’s excess, its potential to outstrip actual conditions, is the creation of balance. It is the nature of that balance which becomes Heaney’s focus in ‘The Redress of Poetry’.

II

At their finest, Heaney’s essays in redress and in the virtues of a certain kind of excess are simply, self-justifyingly persuasive; they are themselves rapt exercises in the articulation of the pleasure given to a fine reader by what Wordsworth is quoted as naming “the grand elementary principle of pleasure”, that principle which meets, opposes and transcends the principle of unpleasure, the unavoidability of suffering, in history.²¹

Given the importance of Heaney’s style to the success of his defence, it is unsurprising that as his argument for poetry reaches its culmination, so too do his powers of articulation. ‘The Redress of Poetry’ is an exercise in conceptual and expressive

²⁰ Heaney, ‘Above the Brim’, 285-286.

²¹ Corcoran, 214.

brilliance, the pinnacle of decades of thought and writing on the subject. In it, Heaney argues that poetry achieves three different kinds of ‘redress’, each of which has been foreshadowed in his previous prose writing. In bringing them together under the ‘rubric of “redress”’, however, he gives his argument new impetus and weight, and demonstrates again one of the most persuasive aspects of his writing; namely, his ability to give concrete expression, through the use of aptly-chosen metaphors, to concepts that would otherwise remain nebulous and, for most of us, beyond our own powers of articulation.²²

Heaney’s argument begins prosaically enough:

professors of poetry, apologists for it, practitioners of it, from Sir Philip Sidney to Wallace Stevens, all sooner or later are tempted to show how poetry’s existence as a form of art relates to our existence as citizens of society – how it is ‘of present use’. Behind such defences and justifications, at any number of removes, stands Plato, calling into question whatever special prerogatives or useful influences poetry would claim for itself within the *polis*. Yet Plato’s world of ideal forms also provides the court of appeal through which poetic imagination seeks to redress whatever is wrong or exacerbating in the prevailing conditions.²³

While the desire to justify poetry is ‘an unwavering principle throughout Heaney’s career’, he indicates in this opening passage to ‘The Redress of Poetry’ that he is not going to join the ranks of poetry’s usual defenders; neither is he going to adopt their popular lines of argument, whether for poetry as a source of all knowledge or as a linguistic laundromat.²⁴ Demonstrating that the political accusation is never far from his thinking about poetry, he reminds us of the differences – and similarities – between the poet and the revolutionary:

moreover, ‘useful’ or ‘practical’ responses to those same conditions are derived from imagined standards too: poetic fictions, the dream of alternative worlds, enable governments and revolutionaries as well. It’s just that governments and revolutionaries would compel society to take on the shape of their imagining, whereas poets are typically more concerned to conjure with their own and their readers’ sense of what is possible or desirable or, indeed, imaginable.²⁵

²² Corcoran, 214.

²³ Heaney, *Redress*, 1.

²⁴ O’Donoghue, *The Language of Poetry*, viii.

²⁵ Heaney, *Redress*, 1.

Heaney speaks here, as always, from his own experience, aptly described by Vendler as characterised by a pressure 'to be more socially specific in [his] poetry than poets can'.²⁶

Wallace Stevens, in his *Letters*, makes a similar point to Heaney:

the role of the poet may be fixed by contrasting it to that of the politician. The poet absorbs the general life: the public life. The politician is absorbed by it. The poet is individual. The politician is general. It is the personal in the poet that is the origin of his poetry ... As the individual he (the poet) must remain free. The politician expects everyone to be absorbed as he himself is absorbed. This expectation is part of the sabotage of the individual.²⁷

It is one of Stevens' terms that Heaney uses to mark this distinction between poet and politician: 'the nobility of poetry' arises from its conflicting goals to those of politics. The revolutionary would dictate, narrow all possible scenarios to the one he or she desires, while the poet's wish, as we have seen, is to extend those possible worlds, potential consequences, in the imagination of his or her readers. The government official would have the poet plant particular seeds in cultivated rows, within a demarcated area; the poet's ambition, however, is to bring forth a forest. Stevens, as we have seen, defines the concept of 'nobility' as poetry's capacity to withstand the weight of the actual, an interior shield of imagination raised against an exterior foe. Heaney's interpretation of the American's work is broader than that of many other contemporary critics, who reduce Stevens' assertion here (perhaps overly mindful of his historical moment) to the claim that poetry 'assists readers subjected to violent realities by opening their minds to fresh ways of thinking'.²⁸ For Heaney, the act of presenting the mind with new possibilities is not only necessary for or useful to those experiencing particular suffering; it is necessary for us all. To put it another way, poetry does not only answer to the accusation of politics, of rioting and genocide, no matter how central that accusation is to Heaney's own life and work; it answers as fully to the question posed by reality itself, in all its forms.

Heaney wastes no time coming to the crux of his argument. Firstly, he acknowledges the kind of protest that might be levelled against the claim that poetry is

²⁶ Helen Vendler, 'Keats and the Use of Poetry', in *The Music of What Happens: Poems, Poets, Critics*, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), 127.

²⁷ Wallace Stevens, *Letters of Wallace Stevens*, ed. H. Stevens, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), 526.

²⁸ Parini, *Why Poetry Matters*, 20.

useful in some potent, meaningful sense. It is the time-honoured one, referred to in more than one of his previous essays. Those who protest against the art form

will want poetry to be more than an imagined response to conditions in the world; ... will urgently want to know why it should not be an applied art, harnessed to movements which attempt to alleviate those conditions by direct action.²⁹

Such people fail to appreciate the actual operations or nature of poetry, its universal social efficacy, enacted when the poet – according to Wallace Stevens – presents us with the imaginative inventions, the visions, the new worlds, which make our lives bearable. This idea is also expressed elsewhere in Heaney's essays, in various forms, most notably in his reference to the different plane of experience accessible through poetry. Here, he uses his most instructive metaphor yet to represent poetry's particular force – that of a labyrinth: 'if our given experience is a labyrinth, its impassability can still be countered by the poet's imagining some equivalent of the labyrinth and presenting himself and us with a vivid experience of it'.³⁰ In other words, the imagination operates as a kind of meta-discourse, at one remove from and thus able to master that which might otherwise be (and often is) in reality overwhelming. All that poetry achieves – through its sounds, its rhythms, the unbridled energy of its beginnings – it achieves in order that it might make our lives endurable, while enabling us also to see beyond our immediate experience.³¹ The imagined version of reality 'does not intervene in the actual', and hence does not do the work of the revolutionary. The poem, however, is still a strongly beneficial experience for both writer and reader, 'offering consciousness a chance to recognise its predicaments, foreknow its capacities and rehearse its comebacks in all kinds of venturesome ways'.³² This line of thinking is crucial to Heaney's concept of redress, which, as I have said, incorporates poetry's ability reveal to us the complexities

²⁹ Heaney, *Redress*, 2.

³⁰ Heaney, *Redress*, 2. As Heaney reformulates it in 'Frontiers of Writing', 'if our given experience is a labyrinth, then its impassability is countered by the poet's imagining some equivalent of the labyrinth and bringing himself and the reader through it'. (Seamus Heaney, 'Frontiers of Writing', in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 191.)

³¹ In 'Edwin Muir', Heaney rearticulates this, describing poetry as 'an intuited, endangering pressure of reality, a true weighing of things as they are dreaded against things as they are desired'. (Seamus Heaney, 'Edwin Muir', in *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 246.)

³² Heaney, *Redress*, 1.

and contradictions both of external reality, and of our own minds. Through poetry, our minds, via the imagination, are extended beyond their usual limits.

Heaney goes on to say, in a further stage of his argument, that poetry constitutes ‘a response to reality which has a liberating and verifying effect upon the individual’.³³ The nature of that response is useful, he argues, because it is unexpected; it is the very opposite of the answer required by the majority, by the politician or activist who would yoke poetry to their cause. He has recourse, at this point in ‘The Redress of Poetry’, to a thinker one of whose central metaphors is absorbed into his defence as though it were originally conceived for that very purpose. Simone Weil, the French philosopher and theologian, describes in *Gravity and Grace* the ‘law’ that should govern the actions of the individual in society and history:

if we know in what way society is unbalanced, we must do what we can to add weight to the lighter scale ... we must have formed a conception of equilibrium and be ever ready to change sides like justice, ‘that fugitive from the camp of conquerors’.³⁴

Justice itself, Weil asserts, is never static – it moves (or should move) constantly between sides, shifting always to the position of the minority or the defeated. Similarly, we must be prepared to add ballast to the less popular, less officially sponsored side of society. To Weil, ‘gravity’ is a metaphor used to encompass all those deterministic forces at work on the individual and the world, which for her are as irrefutable as the Second Law of Thermodynamics (that is, heat-loss) and which can only be escaped, if ever, through the rare visitations of what she terms ‘grace’. Society, in her conception, always operates like gravity, tending towards imbalance. ‘Obedience to the force of gravity’ is, according to Weil, ‘the greatest sin’ – the worst thing we can do as human beings is to throw in our weight with the majority, accepting the constructs, social and otherwise, governing our lives and spirits.³⁵

³³ Heaney, *Redress*, 1.

³⁴ Qtd in Heaney, *Redress*, 3. Heaney’s use of Weil is probably a further indication of his indebtedness to Czeslaw Milosz, who, in essays like ‘The Importance of Simone Weil’ (in *Emperor of the Earth: Modes of Eccentric Vision*, (California: University of California Press, 1981)) and his Harvard lectures, *The Witness of Poetry*, has done much to bring Weil to the attention of fellow writers and contemporaries.

³⁵ Qtd in Heaney, *Redress*, 3.

For Heaney, 'poetry is an extension and refinement of the mind's extreme recognitions and of language's most unexpected apprehensions', and as such it also demonstrates Weil's law in operation:

in the activity of poetry too, there is a tendency to place a counter-reality in the scales – a reality which may only be imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation.³⁶

This is one of Heaney's key formulations, indeed one of the (self-created) touchstones of his defence. In it, he gives voice to the argument upon which that defence finally rests, and in doing so proposes another binary in the workings of the poem, by conceiving of a kind of poetic flight mechanics: the poem must allow itself to be drawn into the force field of the actual, and yet simultaneously resist that pull. The alternative reality that poetry suggests is an alternative – not a matter of mere fancy or wish-fulfilment – precisely because it is shaped by the constant presence of the actual, the heat of which tempers the operations of the authentically imagining imagination in the same way that the presence of heat tempers and makes true steel. If a poem fails to acknowledge the actual, it will fail to make plausible whatever other reality it invokes, or those it invokes will be without weight and substance, drifting in the ether of fantasy; which is to say, they will not be able to redress at all.³⁷

This potential danger notwithstanding, there is an equally important, implicit requirement expressed in Heaney's metaphor, the other half of the binary: namely, that poetry *resist* the gravitational pull of the actual. Even though it must, as it were, engage with the actual (or at least one conception of it), it cannot allow itself to be absorbed or otherwise subsumed by it. So the action of a poem, as ideally conceived by Heaney, is twofold, even paradoxical. It is like an army that both engages with and retreats from its foe at one and the same time. Through such means, poetry achieves that counterbalancing which is experienced by its readers as a liberation, a confrontation with the conditions of life by which they might be oppressed, but also a vehicle which carries them beyond the trap, biological or otherwise, that these conditions so often appear to be.

³⁶ Heaney, *Redress*, 3-4.

³⁷ Heaney, *Redress*, 4.

Elsewhere in Weil's writing, she expresses the case against the imagination, which, she claims, works always against grace, taking the place which it might fill in our lives. Human mortality is a case in point. 'The thought of death calls for a counterweight, and this counterweight – apart from grace – cannot be anything but a lie ... The imagination, filler up of the void, is essentially a liar'.³⁸ The 'void' to which Weil refers is that space which opens up in an individual life when it refuses to obey the laws of gravity, the necessity that governs the world. For her, it is a precondition for the entry of grace into a life. So painful is the experience of this void that, almost by the force of gravity itself, it sucks into itself all those ameliorative fantasies – the imagination, in her terms – which provide a kind of relief, albeit (in her conception) spurious consolation.

Weil, it should be noted, is a theological radical who specifically wants to deprive human beings of all the usual forms of solace, imaginary or otherwise, in order to create that void through which, in her conception, true grace might find its way into a human life. The imagination, for her, is essentially a kind of day-dreaming or wish-fulfilment that keeps its practitioners in the dark, as it were, of the Platonic cave, hindering spiritual enlightenment. Heaney, on the contrary, is no absolutist theologically or otherwise – in fact nothing is more alien to his sensibility. While fully aware of the degree to which the operations of the imagination can be facile, he has a more nuanced idea of what it makes possible. As realised in the finest poetry, it can enter a life in a way analogous to the grace which Weil would have entered and redeemed the void of which she writes, countermanding the actual.

In another essay in *The Redress of Poetry*, Heaney cites Hugh MacDiarmid as a specific instance of a poet whose work, at times, performed that task:

A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle did achieve the redress of poetry. MacDiarmid created a fully realised, imaginatively coherent work, one that contained such life-enhancing satire, such emotional weight and such specific imaginative gravity that it could be placed in the mind's scales as something both equal to and corrective of the prevailing conditions. It was a magnificent intervention by creative power into an historical situation. Its force was the force of the glimpsed alternative and it still gives credence to MacDiarmid's wonderfully stirring affirmation in another context that poetry is human existence come to life.³⁹

³⁸ Weil, 16.

³⁹ Heaney, *Redress*, 115.

The key phrase here, of course, is ‘something both equal to and corrective of the prevailing conditions’: to some extent, our creations must, if they are to be of any help, recreate the conditions of our suffering. The imagined labyrinth must be as convoluted as the real one if we are to find our way through it; the poem must ‘make an order true to the impact of external reality’.⁴⁰ (Les Murray speaks, in a similar vein, of poetry’s usefulness depending on its ability to model the ‘wholeness of thinking and of life’.⁴¹) Heaney’s idea here is a version of Jung’s suggestion that ‘insoluble conflict’ can be overcome through the development of ‘a new level of consciousness’ with which to tackle predicament, a notion that Heaney uses to introduce one of his earlier essays.⁴²

Elsewhere in ‘The Redress of Poetry’, Heaney re-emphasises this notion with a new and memorable metaphor:

as long as the coordinates of the imagined thing correspond to those of the world that we live in and endure, poetry is fulfilling its counterweighting function. It becomes another truth to which we can have recourse, before which we can know ourselves in a more fully empowered way.⁴³

Here, Heaney rephrases his earlier insistence that the draw of the actual should be evident in poetry, and he does so to effect a subtle shift in focus.⁴⁴ The opposing forces at work on the poem in that original metaphor – both towards and away from the actual – are here represented in harmonious action, in cooperation and balance with each other. The binary of gravity and grace, of attraction and repulsion, has been translated into an image uniting those opposites, as the poem both matches reality in a profound and complete sense and yet is not that reality, but something more; there is no longer any drag and resistance at work in the image, but instead precisely the kind of equilibrium for which Heaney is making his argument. The imagination presents us, he claims, with an experience which has all the geographical landmarks, the topography, of our actual lived experience; but which exists at an altitude that is above reality, transcending it even as it correlates with

⁴⁰ Heaney, *Crediting Poetry*, 10.

⁴¹ Murray, 347.

⁴² Heaney, *Finders Keepers*, 112.

⁴³ Heaney, *Redress*, 8.

⁴⁴ Heaney, *Redress*, 4.

it. We find this kind of relationship in the finest poetry, this being, precisely, a mark of its distinction. These seemingly irreconcilable opposites – fidelity to the actual, fidelity to the actuality of the imagination and its needs – are united in harmony rather than opposition in the fully achieved poem. This is, undeniably, a further articulation of Heaney's earlier idea, but the deliberate change in emphasis is testament to his perspicacity both as a critic and as a poet; for it is a poet's discernment at work in the selection of these critically insightful metaphors. It is Heaney's great gift, as a poet-critic, to be able to articulate the dual operation at work in poetry and to reveal it to us with a persuasive, indeed incontestable force.

These central passages in 'The Redress of Poetry' have an intuitively right, self-evident impact. They are further evidence of Heaney's critical-poetic powers, because, in them, he is turning to his own purpose an idea central to the work of Wallace Stevens – one which the American writer himself circles awkwardly, and to far less potent effect, for an entire essay. Heaney's genius, with Stevens as with his other sources, is to extend their ideas to their full potential, soldering those ideas together in such unexpected ways that the machinery of his defence is unparalleled in coherence and dimension. In the case of Stevens' criticism, the contrast with, and the advantage of Heaney is one of both style and substance. The American's central essay on the imagination, the one to which Heaney refers in 'The Redress of Poetry', is 'The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words'. In its thirty-six pages, Stevens quotes only one part of a poem, five lines from Wordsworth's 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802'. Moreover, he does not use that extract to any real effect; he quotes it without any illuminating or explicatory remarks, as though the very act of quotation should suffice as demonstration. The Wordsworth passage, with its preceding and following text, also reveals Stevens' characteristic prose style, and I will therefore quote a section of some length.

If we go back to the collection of solid, static objects extended in space, which Dr Joad posited, and if we say that the space is blank space, nowhere, without colour, and that the objects, though solid, have no shadows and, though static, exert a mournful power, and, without elaborating this complete poverty, if we suddenly hear a different and familiar description of the place:

*This City now doth, like a garment, wear
The beauty of the morning, silent bare,*

*Ships, towers, domes, theatres, and temples lie
Open unto the fields, and to the sky;
All bright and glittering in the smokeless air;*

if we have this experience, we know how poets help people to live their lives. This illustration must serve for the all the rest. There is, in fact, a world of poetry indistinguishable from the world in which we live, or, I ought to say, no doubt, from the world in which we shall come to live, since what makes the poet the potent figure that he is, or was, or ought to be, is that he creates the world to which we turn incessantly and without knowing and that he gives life to the supreme fictions without which we are unable to conceive of it.⁴⁵

‘This illustration’, brief as it is, ‘must serve for all the rest’; and therein lies the difference between the two critics. Heaney is never without an exemplary poem at hand in his defence of the art form, and in fact that defence is, one might argue, most convincingly enacted in his exegesis of other poets’ work. Stevens, by contrast, argues by a process of painful, meticulous logic (albeit with moments of philosophical brilliance), a process which is, it seems, intended to be self-sustaining; and his failure to engage, as Heaney does, with actual instances of the imagination in action weakens his claims, or at least leaves them undefended. The final part of the quotation above is, of course, one of Stevens’ most famous, and one of the most useful to Heaney. It is buried, however, beneath a wearying mass of language, in prose whose rhythm lurches this way and that, inducing vertigo. Heaney’s prose likewise has a very physical effect, but of a completely different kind: it awakens the mind and body of the reader, quickening his or her powers of response, and always rewards that awakening with the further revelation of the literal treasures buried in the poem under discussion. Here, in an extract from ‘Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop’, that difference is evident as Heaney speaks of her well-known villanelle, ‘One Art’, which he has just quoted in full.

In this poem, Bishop’s ability to write plainly and at the same time reticently manifests itself *in extremis*. This is wonderful lyric writing; it is impossible to separate the poem’s reality as a made thing from its effect as a personal cry. It is in one way, of course, entirely formal, preoccupied with its technical procedures, taking delight in solving the challenges of rhyme, in obeying (and disobeying) the rules of the highly constraining villanelle form. At the same time, it is obviously the whimper of a creature who has been hard done by; or, to be more exact, it is a

⁴⁵ Stevens, *The Necessary Angel*, 31.

choked-off whimper, the learnt behaviour of somebody who, without the impersonal demands of an art and an ethic of doughty conduct, might have submitted to self-pity. In fact, the conquest of a temptation to self-pity is what the poem manages to effect: wit confronts hurt and holds a balance that deserves to be called wisdom.⁴⁶

Not all of Heaney's fellow defenders of poetry are as arid in style and critical practice as Stevens, however, and this brings me to another of his significant differences from the majority. Heaney does something which is always extremely difficult. There is an almost unavoidable tendency among human beings, particularly in relation to anything that causes them desperation and despair, whether it be social conditions or the plight of an art form, to go into a kind of rhetorical or spiritual overdrive; it is almost the law of the psyche in relation to such things to seek transcendence. Heaney, remarkably, never does this, or at least never without justification. His poetry, in moments of stress or distress, always moves closer, quite literally, to the earth – in other words, does not seek to escape gravity ('Exposure' is a case in point). Similarly, however much he might be aware of the difficulties poetry faces in his time, and however much he might be inclined to see the art form as a kind of salvation, in his writing about poetry he never resorts to rhetorical uplift, a set of grandiloquent but empty affirmations of faith – as, one might argue, for example, Joseph Brodsky and Czeslaw Milosz do, at least at crucial points. Rather, he listens in to the poem (in other words, bends to the earth again) and demonstrates, again in the most practical and non-vapid forms, the very real riches that are to be found in the word-hoard that is poetry. He is, in this respect, rather like the modern dancer, who in contradistinction to the classical ballerina – always seeking to fight against gravity and indeed transcend it – has, as the most basic motion of his spirit, the tendency to work with, rather than against, all that would pull him downwards.

Foremost among the riches available to us through poetry, as we have seen, is the imaginative creation of an alternative reality, which is the first kind of 'redress', of correction, provided by poetry. Now, in the framework of this overarching metaphor for poetry's efficacy, Heaney reiterates two of the points he has made in *The Government of the Tongue*: the existence of poet-witnesses, like Wilfred Owen, who come to live

⁴⁶ Seamus Heaney, 'Counting to a Hundred: On Elizabeth Bishop', in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 183-184.

according to the measure of an improved, imagined version of reality rather than the lesser standards of their lived reality; and the necessary ascendancy, for all writers, of the creative dynamic itself over their sense of social or other responsibility:

the movement is from delight to wisdom and not vice versa. The felicity of a cadence, the chain reaction of a rhyme, the pleasuring of an etymology, such things can proceed happily and as it were autistically, in an area of mental operations cordoned off by and from the critical sense.⁴⁷

This is another picture of the tongue ungoverned, and the repetition of a theme in Heaney's descriptions of the poetic act – namely, his preoccupation with a pre-rational, instinctive creativity, a mental/physical function as natural as breathing. To allow the imagination its independence is especially difficult, Heaney goes on to point out, in a 'late-twentieth-century context of politically approved themes, post-colonial backlash and "silence-breaking" writing of all kinds':

in these circumstances, poetry is understandably pressed to give voice to much that has hitherto been denied expression in the ethnic, social, sexual and political life. Which is to say that its power as a mode of redress in the first sense – as agent for proclaiming and correcting injustices – is being appealed to constantly.⁴⁸

No less than in previous decades, poets feel the pressure of reality and its demands bearing down upon them and their art form. Malloy and Carey, in their introduction to *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*, quote from an essay on redress by Heaney published in *The Times Literary Supplement* in 1989, in which he vividly describes the contemporary poet's dilemma:

in the postmodern age, [our] very vocabulary has become untrustworthy, undermined by our awareness of its collusion with all kinds of secluded ideologies, based (depending upon your suspicion) upon gender or *imperium*, or, indeed, subversions, and from this acknowledgement of language's duplicitousness arises a doubt about the very possibility of ever pronouncing the authentic, persuasive word ... Thus, under the pressure of conflicting recognitions, in love with the literature of the past but sceptical of the language of

⁴⁷ Heaney, *Redress*, 5. Heaney aligns himself with Yeats's formulation of this idea, that, as Heaney puts it here, 'the will must not usurp the work of the imagination'.

⁴⁸ Heaney, *Redress*, 5.

the present, self-divided and self-rebuking, the poet stands like an embodiment of both the loaded scales and the trembling pointer needle.⁴⁹

It is the risk of both poet and poetry losing their balance that brings Heaney to the second kind of redress poets should provide: their duty ‘to redress poetry *as* poetry, to set it up as its own category, an eminence established and a pressure exercised by distinctly linguistic means’.⁵⁰ Do not forget, Heaney admonishes us, the efficacy of song itself. The force of poetry’s content should be matched (if not, in a sense, exceeded) by that of its form, its fulfilment of its own aesthetic laws. The medium should not suffer in the expression of the message, and we should rejoice in poetry’s intrinsic, unhampered power as an art form. The critical corollary of this, as Heaney is concerned to point out, is that we should not deny our genuine responsiveness to a poetry which belongs to a tradition that is part of a ‘discredited cultural or political system’. James Joyce, for example, was vulnerable to the allure of the Elizabethan poets, despite his antagonism towards the British Empire itself; and he did not deny ‘his susceptibility to the totally persuasive word in order to prove the purity of his resistance to an imperial hegemony’.⁵¹ What Joyce, and others, teach us, then, is that a poem’s musical power, its function as redresser of itself, should not be discounted simply because the work itself reflects the views of a fallen or unpopular political or cultural system.

When the second kind of redress takes place, and poetry is most fully, forcefully itself, it answers to a need in the reader that otherwise goes unfulfilled, a need that is met by poetry in the ‘fluid, exhilarating moment which lies at the heart of any memorable reading, the undisappointed joy of finding that everything holds up and answers the desire that it awakens’. The suggestion of a consummation that is almost erotic is not adventitious. For when this fulfilment takes place, Heaney writes, we literally transcend, in every aspect of our being, ‘all that is contingent and ... “inconsequential”’, and in doing so, as at no other time, we believe wholly and empirically that poetry is ‘strong enough to help’ – the latter a phrase from the notebooks of George Seferis.⁵²

⁴⁹ Heaney qtd in Catherine Malloy and Phyllis Carey, ‘Introduction’, in *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*, (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), 17.

⁵⁰ Heaney, *Redress*, 5-6.

⁵¹ Heaney, *Redress*, 7.

⁵² Heaney, *Redress*, 9.

Our conviction of poetry's usefulness is, in short, felt most strongly when a poem successfully 'redresses poetry *as* poetry' as well as providing a counterweight to reality. As Heaney summarises this elsewhere, the art form

justifies its readers' trust and vindicates itself by setting its 'fine excess' in the balance against all of life's inadequacies, desolations and atrocities ... [it] makes an indelible first impression on the ear and then survives in the mind as a pleasure, a potency and even, occasionally, a principle.⁵³

That 'fine excess' is also the source of the third kind of redress conceived of by Heaney as intrinsic to poetry. He has, until this point in the essay, cited two possible meanings of the word, which it is instructive to rehearse. On the one hand, redress can mean 'reparation of, satisfaction or compensation for, a wrong sustained or the loss resulting from this', in relation to poetry's balancing out against reality. On the other, it can mean 'to set (a person or thing) upright again; to raise again to an erect position. Also *fig.* to set up again, restore, re-establish', with reference to poetry reasserting itself as an art form.⁵⁴

Now, Heaney writes, he wants 'to profess the surprise of poetry as well as its reliability ... its given, unforeseeable thereness', and to describe how it enters into our line of sight and invigorates our minds and bodies. The poet likens his art, in this instance, to the bird-shaped transfers that one can apply to windows or glass doors, which

must suddenly enter the vision and change the direction of the real birds' flight. In a flash the shapes register and transmit their unmistakable presence, so the birds veer off instinctively. An image of the living creatures has induced a totally salubrious swerve in the creatures themselves. And this natural, heady diversion is also something induced by poetry ...⁵⁵

The metaphor itself is worth dwelling on. It reveals once more Heaney's preternatural gifts for giving concrete embodiment to what might ordinarily be considered the most elusive and even abstract of notions. If Heaney persuades – and by the same token if his defence is ultimately persuasive – it is because of his unparalleled ability, as witnessed

⁵³ Seamus Heaney, 'Speranza in Reading: On "The Ballad of Reading Gaol"', in *The Redress of Poetry: Oxford Lectures*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1995), 83.

⁵⁴ OED qtd in Heaney, *Redress*, 15.

⁵⁵ Heaney, *Redress*, 15.

here, to come up with metaphors that enable the reader to trace the reality of an inner movement as if it had the solidity, the real existence, of the most tangible of objects, even while at the same time being evanescent. The art form, here as before, is an image of the real thing, sufficiently alike to the actual to have a markedly beneficial effect, and to do so suddenly and unpredictably. The response of the real birds to the two-dimensional creatures is ‘instinctive’, ‘natural’, ‘heady’ – all of which are also descriptions, in Heaney’s opinion, of the effects of poetry on the reader. The aptness, the unmistakable necessity of poetry in our lives, even as its operations catch us by surprise, render it ‘at one moment unforeseeable and at the next indispensable’.⁵⁶ This, then, is the third definition of ‘redress’ which is called into play: ‘*Hunting*. To bring back (the hounds or deer) to the proper course’, a definition in which the word ‘proper’ carries no moral or ethical connotation, as Heaney is careful to point out. Rather, this kind of redress is about the channelling, the steering, of the sudden imaginative overflow resulting from poetry in a salutary direction. It is this capacity of poetry to which Les Murray also draws attention in his suggestion that the art form models

the whole simultaneous gamut of reasoning, envisioning, feeling and vibrating we go through when we are really taken up with some matter, and out of which we may act on it. We are not just thinking about whatever it may be, but savouring it and experiencing it and wrestling with it in the ghostly sympathy of our muscles. We are alive at full stretch towards it. Poetry models the fullness of life ...⁵⁷

And when it achieves this, Heaney writes in the final lines of the essay, when the art form embodies all three kinds of redress in simultaneous operation, the result is liberation of a singular sort: ‘the spirit is called extravagantly beyond the course that the usual life plots for it ... [and] outcry or rhapsody is wrung from it as it flies in upon some unexpected image of its own solitude and distinctness’.⁵⁸

III

As is evident from the very terms he privileges, Heaney’s defence of poetry takes its place in a long line of Romantic defences of the art form; as I have already indicated, and

⁵⁶ Heaney, *Redress*, 192.

⁵⁷ Murray, 347-348.

⁵⁸ Heaney, *Redress*, 16.

as certain critics have pointed out, his poetry, too, is essentially neo-Romantic. The art form – for Heaney as for his predecessors, be they Shelley or Wallace Stevens – essentially comes to take the place of religion in ensuring the psychic health of humankind, although in Heaney's defence it does not do so by supplanting religious faith, but by filling the gap that has been left by the absence of belief in a post-religious age. The spirit at work in this creed, as we have seen, is the imagination; and because of this, not least, Heaney's defence stands implicitly opposed to what he perceives as another, although substantially lesser, threat to poetry's wellbeing – broadly, the postmodern literary movement.

Within postmodern discourse, the imagination is generally regarded as a deeply suspect concept, considered by many theorists 'a mystified and mystifying bourgeois notion, a romantic way of concealing the real roots of creativity which reach down not into some dark inner world' – which is, of course, precisely how Heaney views it – 'but into that ideology which it is the radical critic's task to demystify'.⁵⁹ Central to this dismissal of the imagination is the dismissal of its relation to the "original" creation of meaning'; for the postmodern critic, the imagination is no more than a series of images endlessly multiplied, reflecting no ultimate, true, original reality, but instead the very absence of that reality. The metaphor commonly used to illustrate this is that of a series of mirrors, reflecting nothing but each other in an infinite reproduction of superficial appearance.⁶⁰ Rather than an external, tangible world, it is language itself that becomes the beginning and end of meaning and experience; there is nothing pre-linguistic, and there is nothing post-linguistic, and, as the quotation above indicates, the critic's focus is on uncovering the ideologies that inform, indeed construct, the institution that is literature.

Such notions, as applied to poetry, are anathema to Heaney, and he has said as much, opposing implicitly and at times explicitly, in both his poetry and prose, the fundamental tenets of postmodernism. In *Stepping Stones*, he recalls the effect that

⁵⁹ Peter Washington, *Fraud: Literary History and the End of English*, (London: Fontana, 1989), 163.

⁶⁰ Richard Kearney and Alan Saunders, *The Wake of Imagination: Toward a Postmodern Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1998), 252; Richard Kearney, *The Poetics of Imagining: Modern to Postmodern*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), 178.

literary movement's challenge had on the poetry in his 1987 collection, *The Haw Lantern*:

I didn't see this as clearly at the time, but now I can see also that there's a countervailing impulse at work [in the book], a refusal to discredit 'the real thing' ... There's a contest going on between Derry and Derrida. Not that I had read Derrida, but in the eighties, back in the milieu of the Harvard English Department, it was impossible not to be aware of the challenge he was offering. The words in the word-hoard were in danger of being dematerialised and everything in me was protesting silently ...⁶¹

In his later lectures, that protest is given voice. In *Finder Keepers*, Heaney laments the effects that postmodern critical technique is having on undergraduates, who are, nowadays, 'being taught prematurely to regard the poetic heritage as an oppressive imposition', and to distrust it for its artfully concealed gender, class and power prejudices. Such suspicions have a place, he reasons, but that place is not in the minds of students who have not as yet learned to read literature *qua* literature, as something other than a reflection of ideology.⁶² Stephen Watt, in *Postmodern/drama*, recalls attending an unpublished lecture Heaney gave at a conference in 1995, in which he spoke of the contrast between the empathetic, practical criticism of the 1950s and 1960s, and the 'desperate' desire of postcolonial, postmodern theorists to uncover whatever cultural or political ideology is at work in a text. Those critics, Heaney declares, demonstrate a 'postmodern incapacity' to see in poetry 'any link between the ludic and the veritable', a link which is at the very heart of his own defence of the art form.⁶³ And in a telling comparison, Heaney says of John Clare in *The Redress of Poetry* that his writing 'inspires one to trust that poetry can break through the glissando of postmodernism and get stuck in the mud of real imaginative haulage work'. The slippery, ungraspable, purposely purposeless discourse of postmodernism stands in direct contrast to the sweaty, physical, productive operations of poetry as conceived of by Heaney; that scale of notes goes nowhere, ending essentially where it began, while the poetry that the Irish writer defends

⁶¹ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 287.

⁶² Seamus Heaney, 'On Poetry and Professing', *Finders Keepers: Selected Prose 1971-2001*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2002), 71-72.

⁶³ Qtd in Stephen Watt, *Postmodern/drama: Reading the Contemporary Stage*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 9.

makes things happen. The no doubt considered juxtaposition of ‘real’ and ‘imaginative’ in this description is both a deliberate oxymoron – one affirming that reality and the imagination are two distinctive entities, that there is indeed an actual world – and not an oxymoron at all, but a cooperative binary; like the spirit and the earth, the real and the imaginary collaborate within poetry to make it efficacious.

But perhaps the most immediately persuasive of Heaney’s responses to the postmodern and its concomitant critical modes is found in ‘On His Work in the English Tongue’, a poem in memory of Ted Hughes, the first section of which reaffirms Heaney’s – and Hughes’ – belief in the forcibleness of poetic language:

Post-this, post-that, post-the-other, yet in the end
not past a thing. Not understanding or telling
or forgiveness.

But often past oneself,
pounded like a shore by the roller griefs
in language that can still knock language sideways.⁶⁴

For Heaney, then, postmodernism presents a recognisable challenge to the autonomy, and what he would go so far as to call the essence, of poetry; but that challenge is not one to which he finds it necessary to respond on any significant scale. His stance is, in theoretical terms, vulnerable to attack. But, as always, Heaney defends himself not primarily through counter-attack. He does so by attending (with all the implications of that verb) to the object of his devotion, poetry and poems, and by showing, once again, through practical demonstration that there is far more there in poetry – that there is indeed a *there* there (to alter Gertrude Stein’s remark) – than theory and its often relative terms might lead us to believe. In this respect, he puts one in mind of Dr Johnson and his famous rebuttal, ‘I refute thee thus!’; except that his self-appointed task is not refutation, but exposition and exemplification.

There is a sense, it must be admitted, in which Heaney simply does not square up to the postmodern challenge that would be concerned to demystify the notion of the imagination as simply one more surrogate (and thus suspect) religion. All the evidence suggests that Heaney believes that such religions are a necessity, and, moreover, that our

⁶⁴ Seamus Heaney, ‘On His Work in the English Tongue’, in *Electric Light*, (London: Faber & Faber, 2001), 61.

recourse to them is a central element in our definition of what it is to be fully human. The postmodernist might well subject such a conviction to irony. Heaney, again cannily, does not subject postmodernism to his own irony. Rather, the very way in which he proceeds reveals that there is an abyss between much contemporary theory and the convictions that have come to him as a practising poet – that each comprises, in fact, a kind of discourse which means that it is literally incommensurable, finding no common measure, with the other. This, of course, might well be considered a further contributory cause of the dilemma which faces the art form in the twenty-first century – but Heaney does not seem to deem it worthwhile to pursue the matter.

It may well be asked, given Heaney's critical inheritance, what his articulation of poetry's necessity adds to those of his predecessors. The advantage of his particular argument, its difference, lies both in the illuminative style which Heaney brings to bear on the aspects of those earlier defences which he uses in his own – his very selection of sources, as I have tried to indicate, is testament to his critical acumen – and in his irresistibly persuasive, remarkably consistent demonstration of the defence as it is enacted in a wide variety of poems. So striking are the disclosures that this practical criticism offers the reader that one reads each of Heaney's essays with a sense of anticipation and, indeed, excitement; a sense that individual poems, and indeed poetry as an art form, are about to be not dissected, but developed in the way that a negative forms in a fixing solution: its details become clearer and clearer until its full reality, its being, soaks through the paper. A defence of Heaney's defence, such as this thesis is, at heart, would thus be incomplete without the inclusion – in practice if not in degree of percipience – of the kind of close reading at which Heaney excels. In my final chapter, therefore, I turn, with the lineaments of his argument in mind, to a selection of Heaney's own poems as exempla of his defence in practice.

Chapter 5

The Defence in Practice

The artist's idea of the artistic act, conscious or unconscious, affect[s] certain intrinsic qualities of the artefact.

Seamus Heaney, 'The Fire i' the Flint'¹

I

In none of Heaney's essays on the nature and purpose of poetry does he fail to demonstrate the ways in which the work of one or two poets exemplifies his claims on behalf of the art; and, as I have argued, these applications of his theory are of central importance to the efficacy of his defence as a whole. In this chapter, I will examine five of Heaney's own poems, dating from the start of his career to one of his more recent collections, and I will explore the ways in which his own writing embodies, in at times unexpected ways, the poetic principles he espouses in his prose. I have chosen these five poems because they each, in their own very specific way, reflect a particular aspect of Heaney's defence in operation. My choice has been limited in number by the length constraints of this thesis. I might have chosen ten, or fifteen, or twenty poems: the five here are, in the body of Heaney's work, by no means out of the ordinary in their enactment of his theory, and that enactment is not limited to the time span covered by my selection. In 2006, Heaney published his most recent collection of poems, *District and Circle*, wherein reviewers noted the presence of familiar themes and the reemphasis of past preoccupations, but also an awareness, on the part of the poet, of 'new and distinctly contemporary dangers', including acts of terror and threats to the health of the planet.² While I have not discussed any of the poems from that collection here, it contains, as do his previous works, numerous instances of poetry's self-justifying capacity, and a sense of balance attained and held throughout.

Part of what makes Heaney's theory of poetry convincing is that it is, like Eliot's, 'a by-product of [his] private poetry-workshop; or a prolongation of the thinking that

¹ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 97.

² Brad Leithauser, 'Wild Irish: *District and Circle* by Seamus Heaney', *New York Times*, July 16, 2006. www.nytimes.com (August 27, 2007); Andrew Motion, 'Digging deep: *District and Circle* by Seamus Heaney', *Guardian Unlimited*, 1 April 2006. www.books.guardian.co.uk (August 27, 2007).

went into the formation of [his] own verse'.³ It should perhaps not surprise us to find, therefore, that in many cases his poetry demonstrates, both consciously and unconsciously, the attributes outlined by his theory. That said, no theory of writing, and certainly not Heaney's, is ever translated without mediation into poetry – in that case, it would simply be a poetic version of 'paint-by-numbers' – and the task of elucidating the relationship between the two is not an applied science. Roger Sharrock's comment on Eliot's writing can be equally applied to Heaney's: 'his criticism is by no means simply a programme for the poems he was writing ... The relation between the critic and the poet in [him] is a more intimate and subtle one than that between theorem and demonstration'.⁴ As Heaney himself notes, poetry comes from the writer's unconscious, and no poet is concentrating on a theory of writing while engaged in the activity itself; his theory, then, is not a scaffold for his poetry, and this must be borne in mind when reading the ensuing chapter – which, in the interests of analysis, will be much more schematic than is the reality. My approach to these poems may, in some cases, seem overly systematic; but underlying my exegesis is also a desire to demonstrate how poems seen through the lens of Heaney's defence offer up a particularly rich testimony both of their own individual purposes, and the purposes of the art form itself.⁵

There is a sense, it should be noted, in which all art accomplishes redress, and any successful poem is, in its way, a justification of the art form. On this very general level, no writer can help but be involved in a defence of poetry; as we have seen, however, there are subtleties in the embodiment of Heaney's thinking about his craft which go beyond the obvious. It is these that I will explore in the poems that follow.

II

Death of a Naturalist, Heaney's first collection of poems, contains a number of what remain his best-loved, most-anthologised pieces: 'Digging', in which Heaney grapples with his place as a writer in a family of men who work the land; 'Mid-Term Break', his account of the death of his younger brother; and the eponymous poem, one of the earliest

³ Eliot, *On Poetry*, 106.

⁴ Roger Sharrock, 'Eliot's "Tone"', in *The Literary Criticism of T.S. Eliot: New Essays*, ed. D. Newton-De Molina, (London: The Athlone Press, 1977), 169.

⁵ Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 80.

examples of Heaney's auditory imagination exploring 'the warm thick slobber / of frogspawn'.⁶ The book sets the tone, as it were, for Heaney's poetic career, defining him as a poet of agricultural and natural landscape, of home and history, and of family; and there is evident, throughout, an effort on the part of the poet to reconcile his writing life with the rural occupations of the generations of Heaney men preceding him. 'Follower' is one such poem, an account of the boy Heaney accompanying his father as he ploughs the fields, and in the tautness and balance of its structure, it attains redress in a manner demonstrating, more than anything, the poet's longing to find a terrain common to his work as a writer and his father's work as a farmer.

My father worked with a horse-plough,
his shoulders globed like a full sail strung
between the shafts and the furrow.
The horses strained at his clicking tongue.

An expert. He would set the wing
and fit the bright steel-pointed sock.
The sod rolled over without breaking.
At the headrig, with a single pluck

of reins, the sweating team turned round
and back into the land. His eye
narrowed and angled at the ground,
mapping the furrow exactly.

I stumbled in his hob-nailed wake,
fell sometimes on the polished sod;
sometimes he rode me on his back
dipping and rising to his plod.

I wanted to grow up and plough,
to close one eye, stiffen my arm.
All I ever did was follow
in his broad shadow round the farm.

I was a nuisance, tripping, falling,
yapping always. But today
it is my father who keeps stumbling
behind me, and will not go away.⁷

⁶ Seamus Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1966), 3.

⁷ Heaney, *Death of a Naturalist*, 12.

The opening statement of 'Follower', which is immediately developed into an image, establishes the central themes of the poem: Heaney's father, and his particular kind of labour. There is in that first line an implicit comparison (which becomes more apparent as the poem progresses) between the poet, the son who clearly does not work with a plough, and the father who is defined, here, by that occupation. As he is wont to do, Heaney uses a technical vocabulary, not only to give a concrete reality to his father's ploughing, but also, it seems, because he takes pleasure in such language. Vendler has commented on Heaney's persistent desire to establish a memorial to the long-forgotten farmers of Ireland, something which he does in part by recording technical details such as these:

it is immensely important to Heaney to note down those expert movements – like an anthropologist inventing a notation for an unrecorded dance – lest they vanish unregistered. So in 'Follower' his father at the plough is described moment by moment, with a piety not only filial but generational.⁸

The poem is thus constructed using the language of his father's agricultural domain, neat, precise names like 'shaft', 'sock' and 'headrig'; names which are, as Vendler suggests, increasingly archaic. In the second line of the poem, the act of ploughing takes on elements of discovery and exploration; through Heaney's use of 'globed' and 'full sail', his father has become an adventurer, a larger-than-life figure setting sail to cross the world. Later on, that nautical metaphor is extended as he measures and records in his mind the precise dimensions of the furrow he is ploughing. Michael Parker suggests a reference to the figure of Atlas in Heaney's use of 'globed', which is fitting given the mythically heroic depiction of his father that dominates the surface of the poem.⁹ Inherent in all these images, with their epic undertone, is an element of celebration, the acclamation of Heaney's father's skill, which renders the poem's ultimate significance, as we will see, all the more affecting.

⁸ Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 20. Elmer Andrews, too, observes Heaney's more general belief 'in the magical ability of language to recreate the vanishing crafts of smithing, digging, thatching, divining'. (Elmer Andrews, 'The Spirit's Protest', in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. E. Andrews, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), 211.)

⁹ Parker, 1.

For the first three stanzas, the only human figure in the poem is Heaney's father; our focus is entirely on him, and on the way in which Heaney recreates in words the exertion and expertise of his ploughing. This combination of concentration and physical effort is crucial to Heaney's understanding of his father's labour, not least because it is a version of one of the binaries which, for the poet, defines his own activities: the inspired operations of the mind, the spirit, the subconscious, collaborate with the conscious exercise of craft to produce a fully empowered poem. His father's work, here, like the poet's, is characterised by both perspiration and precision; although at this stage in the poem Heaney has not yet made that link between father and son clear. The focus shifts, however, in the final three stanzas – from exactly halfway through the poem – to the young Heaney. Where the first stanza's opening words are 'my father', the last three all begin with 'I', and the pronouns ('he', 'his') and phrase ('my father') referring to his father occur again only in the last two lines of each of these stanzas, a foreshadowing – as these references 'follow' those to Heaney himself – of the poem's final revelation.

The fourth stanza introduces the reader to what appears to be the 'follower' of the title – the boy Heaney, whose stumbling progress contrasts with his father's assured, booted step and, indeed, with the adult's confidence in all aspects of their environment. He trips, occasionally, on the furrowed land, the product of his father's meticulous measuring and skilful working of the plough, and the man carries the boy sometimes on his back. As he rides on his father's shoulders, Heaney is absorbed into the rhythm of his work, feels, and does not merely observe, the tempo and efficacy of the process. Despite the boy being a pest, which Heaney reemphasises in the last stanza, his father seems, in his willingness to support his son and keep him from tripping, not to mind the constant irritation of his presence. Indeed, as we come to the poem's final three lines, we rely on this image of father carrying son to balance some of the possible readings of the poem to which these lines give rise. There is, in Heaney's descriptions of himself in contrast to his father, a sense of 'love and admiration', as King observes, but also distance, not only in our impression of Heaney's father as larger-than-life, towering above his son, but also in

the figurative gap between their adult occupations; the full extent of that distance becomes clear as the poem concludes.¹⁰

The last sentence of 'Follower' gives it a depth that transforms it from descriptive nostalgia into an account of a far more complex relationship with the past. 'But today', Heaney writes, 'it is my father who keeps stumbling / behind me, and will not go away'. The 'but', in its traditional role here, signals a turning-point; but it is a turning-point that comes very late in the poem and is surprising – despite its adumbration in the shift in focus of the preceding few stanzas – both to the reader and, I feel, to Heaney himself. The description of his father, now, as his 'follower' remakes the whole poem, inverting the picture which Heaney has spent five and a half stanzas establishing. At the most superficial level, we now see the title as a reference both to the boy Heaney and his father, followers of one another at different times in their lives, one literally, the other metaphorically. More profoundly, however, we reorganise the imagery of the poem in keeping with this new knowledge: specifically, we see the first three stanzas as an image of the adult Seamus Heaney working at his craft (poetry rather than ploughing) and the image of the boy Heaney in the last three stanzas becomes an image of his 'stumbling' father. Heaney, as a child, followed his father as he worked the land; now, as an adult, he works the land of literature while followed by his father, who is as much a stranger, it seems, in Heaney's world as Heaney was in his. More specifically, the poem's dominant imagery is no longer a literal picture of the activities involved in ploughing. Instead, ploughing has become an image of writing. The poem is no longer simply about the relationship between Heaney and his father's craft; it is now about the relationship between his father and Heaney's craft, a craft requiring as much precision and skill as working with a horse-plough.

Central to this metaphor is a notion that is, as we have seen, fundamental to Heaney's defence: that poetry is of the earth, as much a muddy, active getting-to-grips with the world as is farming.¹¹ Both 'self-respect and mutual respect' depend on this

¹⁰ P.R. King, "I Step Through Origins", in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. H. Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 80.

¹¹ In *Preoccupations*, discussing Wordsworth's methods of comprehension, Heaney likewise relates poetry and ploughing in a telling reference to the root of the word 'verse', which 'comes from the Latin *versus* which could mean a line of poetry but could also mean the turn that a ploughman made at the head of the field as he finished one furrow and faced back into another.' (Heaney, *Preoccupations*, 65.)

notion, Christopher Ricks argues, for the poet son of a farmer.¹² Equally embedded in Heaney's choice of metaphor is an element of what the critic Martin Seymour-Smith has christened *Künstlerschuld*, or 'artist-guilt'. In this case, that guilt is embodied in the complex, in a sense conflicted, feelings of the pen-pusher for the farmer; and it is played out more obviously in 'Digging' when Heaney's father digs hard and deep below the young poet's window as he writes.¹³ The coexistence of these two convictions – that writing is as much a work, a 'mucking in' to the world, as farming, and that simultaneously it is insufficient in comparison to working the plough – is a more intimate version of the conflict that Heaney identifies as existing between art and life. Here, however, the poet is haunted not by the world's suffering so much as the failure of his art to match the usefulness of his father's 'mapping the furrow'.¹⁴

'Follower', not least as a result of its symmetrical structure and neat last-minute inversion, accomplishes redress of various kinds in a clear and elegant manner. Until the final line, a first reading of the poem presents the reader with a series of realities from the poet's memories of his childhood: of his father, who farmed with great skill; of himself, as a boy, following his father around the fields and being a bother; of his youthful longing to follow figuratively in his father's footsteps as he matured, a longing that went, as the existence of the poem suggests, unfulfilled. In a subsequent reading, in light of the poem's last sentence, we find that each of these realities is 'repaired', balanced, as it were, by their taking on a figurative layer of meaning. The heroic, adventuring image of Heaney's father at the plough is balanced against the image of him staggering, tripping behind his son; the agricultural skill depicted literally in that image is in turn balanced against its metaphorical representation of Heaney's skill with the pen – the unequal relationship implied by the title of the poem and portrayed in its descriptions is thus righted. Similarly, Heaney's clumsy, constant pursuit of his father across the fields is balanced against the image of his rigour and natural ability as a poet, expressed through the metaphor of his father at the plough; it is also repaired by the parallel image of his father dogging his progress. The apparent disparity between their actions at the literal

¹² Christopher Ricks, 'Review of *Death of a Naturalist*', in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. M. Allen (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), 22.

¹³ Martin Seymour-Smith, *Guide to Modern World Literature*, (London: MacMillan, 1985), xxiii.

¹⁴ At the time of writing, Heaney's father was still alive, so in its original context the poem is not yet an elegy for him; rather, it represents a lingering struggle for the poet.

level is balanced by an equal disparity between their exactly reversed positions at the figurative level. Heaney's desire to inherit his father's lifestyle and occupation, and his failure to do so, are balanced against his figurative achievement of that very wish – as a poet, he ploughs in his own way, closing one eye and stiffening his arm as he plots each poem exactly.

The final image in the poem, of Heaney's father staggering behind him, is a troubled and troubling one. The reduction of the hero-father of the first stanzas, at home in his world and worthy of emulation, to a seemingly pitiful figure in the final stanza, a man who 'will not go away' and who is as clumsy as a child in his pursuit of the poet, is both discomfiting and touching – and is meant to be thus. Critics tend to focus on the haunting, inescapable aspect of that stumbling figure: Parker compares the trailing father to Hamlet's, 'a ghost ... who can never be wholly exorcised', and Parini, too, asserts that the poet 'cannot exorcise the father, nor will he ever' – though ridding himself of his father's memory is, as demonstrated by the existence of the poem itself, precisely what Heaney does not want to do.¹⁵ Even one of Heaney's most astute critics, Neil Corcoran, speaks of the poem's conclusion overshadowing its earlier stanzas with a feeling of 'distress' as its tone is transformed retroactively into one of 'cruel irritation with ... the weakness of age'.¹⁶ Andrews describes the poem as emphasising the dual nature of this kind of relationship: it is both burdensome and supportive, just as Heaney and his father are in turn depicted as both burden of and support for the other.¹⁷

In the final phrase of the poem as it stands, there is, certainly, room for a reading of the lines which makes them an expression of horror on the writer's part: his father lurching along behind him, refusing to be gone, is indeed a distressing image, and critics such as Buttell have read 'pain and resentment' into the poem's concluding lines.¹⁸ My inclination not to do likewise stems from Heaney's description of the moment in which father and son are united in purpose, the moment in which the parent lifts the child and incorporates him into the cadence of his labour, overcoming whatever irritation he feels. In a figurative reading of the poem, in which Heaney is the metaphorical 'man of action',

¹⁵ Parker, 64; Jay Parini, 'The Ground Possessed', 100.

¹⁶ Corcoran, 10-11.

¹⁷ Andrews, 'Spirit's Protest', 211.

¹⁸ Robert Buttell, *Seamus Heaney*, (London: Associated University Presses, 1975), 45.

this gesture then becomes evidence that the poet Heaney is not wholly dismayed by the lingering presence of his father at his back; it becomes a gesture of respect, of affection, towards the spirit of his father. That spirit is also representative of the poet's origins, his rural beginnings, a background which is inescapable to the mature Heaney – he is being followed, in the figure of his father, by a whole way of life that is, as it were, asking him to memorialise it.¹⁹ The presence of his father trailing behind him as he writes, therefore, works as an image of Heaney's complex relationship with the past and his inability to shake off that past, whether he would desire to or not; his figurative embracing of his history, his integration of it into the very meters of his poetry, their dip and rise, suggests what Robert Fitzgerald as well as Vendler have termed his 'piety' toward his childhood way of life.²⁰ The poem itself becomes an instance of Heaney lifting his father, lifting his pastoral origins, onto his back, and carrying them for the duration of six stanzas.

Those origins have, doubtless, influenced one of the ways in which Heaney conceives of the work of poetry in his essays: as an earthly, dirty, hands-on process, the work of a manual labourer, a farmer, a peasant. It is not surprising, therefore, that we should find a similar conception reflected in his poetry; in 'Follower', working with a horse-plough becomes an image of the creative act, and the precision of that work becomes, likewise, a reflection of the painstaking operations of the poet at his desk. Those operations are evident not only in Heaney's description of them, but also in the grace and exactitude of the poem's own structure and form, its effortless demonstration of the potential for poetry to operate on two planes at once. 'Follower' is, therefore, a restoration not only of an outdated way of life, but also of poetry as an art form, an exercise of phonetic and semantic harmony. As King remarks, there is a direct link between the agricultural skill of his father and the traditional, regular rhyme and meter of Heaney's poem; the connection that remains between Heaney and his father, and which is evident to the reader, is 'a sense of craft'.²¹

The poem is written in tetrameter, and Heaney varies the syllable count here and there with an extra syllable. The execution of his abab rhyme scheme is indicative of his

¹⁹ Michael Molino makes a similar argument in *Questioning Tradition, Language and Myth*, 28.

²⁰ Robert Fitzgerald, 'Seamus Heaney: An Appreciation', in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. H. Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 44; Corcoran, 11, argues similarly.

²¹ King, 80.

preference for slant rhymes – ‘sock / pluck’, ‘eye / exactly’, ‘plough / follow’ – but every stanza has one exact rhyme and one slant rhyme. Thus the rhyme itself mimics the poem’s content, the picture of a strong, precise figure interacting with a weaker, clumsier one. The sounds of the poem are equally connected with its sense: we see the hard glint of the light and feel the sharp-tipped implement in the high, tense vowels and spiked stops of ‘**bright steel-pointed sock**’; we feel the ‘sod’ loosen and turn as it ‘roll[s] over’, as its monophthong moves into two rolling diphthongs. Similarly, our mouths and ears dip and rise with Heaney and his father as the diphthong in ‘rising’ swoops upwards. Roland Mathias has described well the way in which the poem’s development of meaning is intertwined with its sounds and rhythms:

while the picture of the poet’s father is put together in the sharp, metallic-sounding manner that the chink and click of the process suggest to the ear, the control implicit in this weakens as the poet depicts his own failure ever to achieve the rhythm intrinsic to this ‘mystery’. At the end of the poem, it is the father-son relationship, reversed, that holds the composition together, and the echoes are no longer the echoes of a set and understood rhythm, but of ‘stumbling’ ...²²

The implications of coherence, of structure and control, in the opening stanzas, are heightened by the fact that we hear those high, mechanical sounds above a *basso continuo* of low vowels that draw them unavoidably to the ground, to the soil that is dug and turned. The guttural vowel of ‘strung’, which dips the word earthwards, is heard with each rhythmic turn of the stanza, of the plough, in ‘tongue’, ‘**pluck**’, and twice as ‘furrow’ is repeated, and it takes a rounder but no less evocative shape in ‘sock’ and ‘sod’. Thus the machinery of the plough makes contact with the ground in a pattern of alternating high and low vowel articulations, and the mastery which Heaney sees in his father – a mastery embodied in the smooth motions of the plough and their consistent results – is mimicked by the predictable rise and fall of the tongue in the mouth.

The poem’s other major achievement in relation to the craft as a whole is in its flawless demonstration of what Heaney terms, in *The Government of the Tongue*, ‘an experience of release’, that moment, as the poem reaches its culmination, in which a new plane of regard is established, one which frees poet and reader alike from their

²² Roland Mathias, ‘Death of a Naturalist’, in *The Art of Seamus Heaney*, ed. T. Curtis, (Mid Glamorgan: Poetry Wales Press, 1982), 19-20.

dilemmas.²³ I have already described the effects of the moment when we read the final three lines, the way in which the entire poem is reshaped, in which roles are inverted by the transformation of the literal into the figurative. In reality, that opening of a new set of meanings for the poem occurs in a fleeting instant as our reading of the poem ends, and the roles of father and son are transposed. In that moment, Heaney lifts us to that new plane, a plane quite distinct from the reality he has described – a reversal of it, in fact – and one in which the predicaments of the poet, shared at this stage by the reader, release him into a place where, as Heaney puts it elsewhere, there is redemption.²⁴ In this case, there is redemption of father and son, of a particularly rural way of life, and of the poem as a whole, redemption accomplished not least through the action of redress in its first, world-balancing sense.

I also suggested above that Heaney himself is surprised, as poet, by the final three lines of the poem – meaning not that he did not craft them as carefully as the rest of the poem, but that his tone has a touch of bewilderment about it, and that that bewilderment is ingenuous. Certainly it is at this moment in the poem that we see poetry's ability to redirect our attention, our preconceptions, in operation. Its overall significance, and our comfortable assumptions about its title and themes, veer off the course plotted by the plough; Heaney has created a diversion on which the entire poem pivots, drawing our attention right back to the title, to the beginning of the poem's furrow, overturning our assumptions along the way as he maps a whole new field of meaning.

III

The achievement of redress in Heaney's poetry is not always – is, in fact, rarely – as overt as it is in 'Follower', whose final stanza deliberately upends the poem's meaning and thus counterbalances it. Frequently, that function is performed so subtly, so discreetly, that the reader hardly notices that redress has been accomplished even as he or she is satisfied, consoled, by a sense of rightness and equilibrium as a poem concludes. In a little known, rarely anthologised poem from his 1972 collection, *Wintering Out*, Heaney enacts the vocal agility Vendler describes when she remarks that his 'voice, by

²³ Heaney, *Government*, xxii.

²⁴ Heaney, *Government*, 107.

turns mythological and journalistic, rural and sophisticated, reminiscent and impatient, stern and yielding, curt and expansive, is one of a suppleness almost equal to consciousness itself".²⁵ In 'Limbo', through a hardly noticeable shift in voice, he brings an irresolvable predicament to a point of purely poetic resolution; and he does so by creating, as it were, an alternative consciousness for the reader.

'Limbo', as Neil Corcoran points out, receives very little critical attention in studies of Heaney's work; its narrative, of an unwed, Irish Catholic mother who drowns her newborn infant, perhaps does not engage Heaney's typical critics as much as his more obvious, more unambiguous comments on Irish politics and society.²⁶ Whatever the reason, it is a poem that goes generally unnoticed by commentators, and thus the exquisite manner in which it resolves, and the efficiency, the economy of language with which that conclusion is reached, are largely unremarked. It epitomises, in my view, however, the redressal provided by poetry, and it does so all the more convincingly for the unobtrusive elegance with which its argument is made.

Fishermen at Ballyshannon
netted an infant last night
along with the salmon.
An illegitimate spawning,

a small one thrown back
to the waters. But I'm sure
as she stood in the shallows
ducking him tenderly

till the frozen knobs of her wrists
were dead as the gravel,
he was a minnow with hooks
tearing her open.

She waded in under
the sign of her cross.
He was hauled in with the fish.
Now limbo will be

a cold glitter of souls

²⁵ Helen Vendler, "'Echo Soundings, Searches, Probes'", in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. H. Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 178-179.

²⁶ Corcoran, 31.

through some far briny zone.
Even Christ's palms, unhealed,
smart and cannot fish there.²⁷

The title and the opening line of 'Limbo' introduce the two figurative components that will dominate the poem throughout: the religious, and the piscatory. There is, of course, a connection between those two domains in biblical tradition: Christ's disciples were chosen from among fishermen, and more obviously, more distressingly present is Christ's commission to those disciples to become 'fishers of men'. Here, the fishermen of Ballyshannon are, quite literally, catchers of a human being, the body of a drowned infant pulled in with the fish; a child whose discovery in the trawler nets gives Heaney the literal, and finally figurative platform he needs in order to give the poem closure.

The opening statement of the poem seems to be one of fact: we imagine that Heaney has read this item in a newspaper, perhaps in the very words that constitute the first three lines of the poem. An element of what could be poetic interpretation emerges as he refers to the child's illegitimacy in the first of three images comparing him to a fish, in this case one too small to be caught, and hence tossed back into the ocean. It is not the fishermen, however, who have rejected this infant; rather, it is his own mother, a woman who, Heaney suggests, has borne him out of wedlock. She is Catholic – that much is clear from the title of the poem – and we assume, too, perhaps, that the fishing village in which she lives is small, pious, ready to pass judgment. Her act, in Heaney's poem, becomes one of desperation: for herself and her reputation, perhaps also her livelihood, and, by implication, the future of the child she drowns; and the poem reveals to us, through careful, restrained empathy, how painful, how difficult, the mother's action is for her. Heaney allows her, as she drowns her child, more than a single dimension, more than a role confined to that of agent of death, which would be her fate in a newspaper editorial. She dips her child gently into the ocean, maternally, in an action poignantly, ironically, reminiscent of baptism. We feel the cold of her wrists in the icy water, and by extension the necessary 'icing over' of her heart, her affective life; and the child she finally leaves to be washed out with the tide wounds her, hurts her, with every downward thrust of her arms. These descriptions depict her – contrary to Tobin's assertion that 'her natural

²⁷ Seamus Heaney, *Wintering Out*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), 58.

motherly instinct' has been lost to her – as suffering precisely because her maternal feelings persist.²⁸ The agony of her decision, its impossible pull on her heart, is further emphasised by the parallel descriptions of mother and child in the penultimate stanza: she 'wades' into the water, pushing against the tide that washes towards the shore, that would wash her away from the place in which she will drown her baby; he is 'hauled' in by the fishermen, dragged from an element in which he was never meant to find himself into one in which he can no longer exist.

Heaney thus amends our tendency to condemn the mother, automatically, as cruel and inhuman, as inherently unlike ourselves, by forcing us to view her as human, as sentient, *within the confines of her deed*. This last point is of particular importance, because Heaney's treatment of that deed is a signal instance of the imagination's coordinates matching those of the real circumstances. Heaney doesn't create for the girl (and in my reading she is just that) an existence beyond the moment in which she drowns her infant. He takes the instant in which we imagine her, the only moment in which we feel able to lay claim to any knowledge of her, and he redresses the imbalances of our judgement and attention in that instant, within its field of gravity, if you like. The only detail with a referent external to that moment is the assertion that she entered the water 'under / the sign of her cross', a statement which acts as further reparation by foregrounding the reason, in a sense, for the infanticide; that cross represents both the Christian moral code that the girl feels is forcing her to conceal the proof of her sin, and also the judgment that awaits her if she fails to do so. Heaney's reminder of those beliefs, of the community mores that govern the mother's behaviour, only fixes the coordinates of the event more exactly in reality.

The poem's final image is simultaneously an acknowledgement of the irresolvable nature of the situation Heaney has described, and, paradoxically, a resolution, I would argue, a poetic redemption of that situation. Limbo, the place to which, according to Catholic dogma (until recently), dead unbaptised infants were sent, is compared with the sea.²⁹ Christ is rendered as a fisherman, but one who, having been crucified, has wounds in his palms that prevent him from reaching into the 'cold glitter of souls' – like a shoal

²⁸ Tobin, 97.

²⁹ Limbo as the location of infants who die unbaptised was officially removed from Catholic doctrine in April 2007.

of fish beneath the water – in the salty expanse that is limbo.³⁰ The giver of the great commission to be fishers of men, Christ himself, can do nothing to save the children in that place; even his sacrifice, finally, is inadequate, and despite his being the personification of love, there is still, in his creation, ‘a region of absolute indifference’.³¹ God’s own hands, and those of the poet himself, are rendered ineffectual by the numb, bony wrists of the mother holding her child underwater. This, then, is the poem’s final emphasis, and it is one which lends it an almost unbearable pathos as it concludes.

The remarkable manner in which Heaney achieves poetic redress here is easily overlooked, so subtly, yet so fully, does he transform reality in these twenty lines. While never losing sight of the tangible horror of the drowned infant – indeed, it is within the current of that tragedy that the poem moves from start to finish – Heaney alters our perception of it in a number of unexpected ways. Not least among these is his persistence in bringing to our attention the role of religion in the mother’s act. The drowning of a newborn baby is an action that should exclude the transcendent completely; it is transcendent only in the sense that it is something beyond redemption, and beyond the forgiveness that even religion promises, just as limbo itself is the realm of the unredeemed. The murder of a child – by anyone, but most of all by his own parent – is an act always unmitigated. Heaney, however, highlights the contradiction underlying the mother’s deed, the inescapable presence, in his view, of the transcendent in this most sordid of circumstances; the entire poem, as I have said, is couched in biblically allusive terms, from the very first line. ‘Limbo’ therefore redresses our refusal to consider factors that might moderate the repugnance, the unforgivable nature of the act, and, crucially, it redresses our tendency to exclude the transcendent except where it brings resolution. The

³⁰ This description of Christ is underlain by the image of the archetypal ‘wounded healer’, which, according to Sussman, has a history dating back at least to ancient Greece and used most famously, perhaps, by Jung in the 1940s. The essence of the archetype is that the successful healer must bear a wound, or wounds, of his or her own; the whole and healthy person cannot heal as effectively and profoundly as the injured one. Christ is one of the most significant instances of the archetype in Western culture, but Heaney’s Christ, in ‘Limbo’, cannot heal *because of the wounds that should in fact enable him to help*. This underlying inversion of the archetype adds to the tragedy of the image, and consequently to the force of Heaney’s poetic resolution. The Irishman would no doubt also have been acquainted with Wagner’s *Parsifal*, Eliot’s notes to ‘The Waste Land’ regarding *The Golden Bough*, and much else on the Fisher King motif. (Michael B. Sussman, *A Curious Calling: Unconscious Motivations for Practicing Psychotherapy*, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 22-23.)

³¹ Buttel, 68. Corcoran, 31, describes the Christ of ‘Limbo’ as ‘a figure of the most intense exclusion and ineffectualness’.

presence of Christ, Heaney implies, does not always equate with consolation and relief, or with judgment and punishment. Heaven and hell are not, it seems, the only domains of the spiritual; and it is the unsettling effect of this knowledge, of the idea of limbo itself, that Heaney counterweighs with his closing image.

The total efficacy of that image depends on the way in which Heaney develops the poem's 'argument', an argument which moves continually, as does the language of the poem, towards a plane of regard that is wholly poetic, and yet unbreakably anchored in the actual. Heaney begins the poem with a statement which, as I have said, we accept as fact; he then immediately suggests that the drowned child is illegitimate, and has been discarded, as it were, as a result – a suggestion which, given the circumstances of the mother as we have already been able to deduce them, seems reasonable. Halfway through the second stanza, Heaney shifts our position as readers ever-so-slightly; the 'detached, journalistic account of events', as Vendler describes it, gives way to the voice of the imagination – 'but I'm sure', he writes, she must have suffered, too.³² We hardly notice this shift, this small movement into poetry, and by the beginning of the fifth stanza and Heaney's next sentence, 'I'm sure' has been forgotten and we are beginning to read Heaney's imagined account of the scene as truth. In part, this is because his statements make good sense: the girl's inability to avoid this decision, as she makes it under the shadow of her faith, speaks once more to our assumptions about the community in which she lives. 'He was hauled in with the fish' is a restatement of the opening assertion of the poem, and we know this to be fact. And on the strength of these carefully guided remarks, Heaney moves us at last right out of 'factual' reality and into a logic that is purely poetic; that is, a logic and a resolution which exist only within this poem.

In his closing lines, Heaney offers an explanation for the fact that Christ cannot remove infants from limbo, and this resolution depends wholly on Heaney's image of limbo as seawater, as salty; it is, in other words, a reconciliation that takes place entirely through poetry itself. Christ, with his palms unhealed from the crucifixion, cannot reach into that saliferous place, because his wounds sting; and by this stage in the poem, we are ready to accept that argument. Heaney has drawn us from the reality of the situation, from the labyrinth of the actual event, into an alternate reality, a transcendent one, in

³² Parker, 112.

which we see and experience the twists and turns of this mother's impossible maze, but do so from a higher plane of regard. In the moment in which we are completely convinced by the poem's own reality, in which we set down on that new plane, the poet offers a kind of poetically rational resolution. Emotionally, outside of this logic, resolution is impossible, limbo is inexplicable, and this is the power of Heaney's poem: it is about those things which *cannot* be redressed, not least in poetry. Limbo is a place, as Andrews describes it, 'beyond redemption, beyond the available languages which could make it comprehensible' – and yet, as becomes clear, the poem redresses even in providing us with a due and fitting image of that which cannot be redressed.³³

'Limbo' is an example of Heaney's craft at its best; it is a relatively short poem – five stanzas of four lines, each three or four feet long – and its language is precisely calibrated to its purpose. In its clean, short lines we find what the art critic Peter Fuller calls 'redemption through form', a kind of salvation available through the aesthetic shaping of a moment, in this case a moment that seems to defy language and form, into something tangible, something crafted and moulded.³⁴ The sensation of this poem is nothing so much as that of the freezing seawater in which mother and child find themselves; the distance, the repellent chill of the scene – even as it is rendered with profound pity – evokes limbo long before Heaney has presented his final image to the reader. Part of what enables Heaney to achieve this sense of coldness and loneliness is the subtlety of the phonic devices that he uses. The tides, the wash of seawater against the side of the fishing-boat, are echoed in the alternating 'sh' and nasal sounds of the opening line – '**Fishermen** at Bally**shannon**' – and that soft swash is overlaid, in the next line, by an insistent stutter, like a sudden increase in heartbeat – '**netted** an infant last night'. There are slant rhymes in places, over, for example 'Ballyshannon' / 'salmon' and 'souls' / 'zone'; but Heaney's use of auditory devices is matched exactly with the tone and content of the poem as a whole, and achieves the necessary level of poetic cohesion without becoming excessive or inappropriately lavish. There is a silence about the mother's act of drowning her child during the night, a silence transposed into the image

³³ Andrews, 'Spirit's Protest', 213.

³⁴ Peter Fuller, *Marches Past*, (London: Chatto and Windus, 1986), 135.

of the mother's wrists being 'dead as the gravel'. We do not hear the child whimper, or the mother weep; we hear nothing more, perhaps, than the water lapping against them.

IV

Between 1972 and 1975, Seamus Heaney lived in Glanmore, County Wicklow, earning money as a freelance writer while concentrating on his poetry. This move, as Rachel Buxton suggests, was significant for Heaney as both writer and Irishman, as it brought unavoidable focus – his own and that of others – to the tension between his political, communal obligations and his artistic ones.³⁵ These years resulted in *North*, one of his best-known collections, which includes his famous 'bog poems' – 'Bog Queen', 'The Grauballe Man' and 'Punishment' to name a few – and the six-poem sequence 'Singing School'.

The title 'Singing School' is a Yeatsian phrase, and Heaney signals this by using, as his second epigraph, a passage from Yeats' *Autobiographies* in which the latter describes experiencing 'the pleasure of rhyme' for the first time, reading 'a book of Orange rhymes'.³⁶ Acutely aware of Heaney's Roman Catholicism and his resulting political position – the other poems in *North* have brought these to our attention repeatedly – we are confronted with a moment in the young, Protestant Yeats' life in which he dreams of 'fighting the Fenians'. Undercutting this political schism between the poets are the implications of the title, 'Singing School', which Yeats uses with reference to his influential predecessors, the poets who have been his 'singing-masters'; by quoting Yeats and his delight in rhyme under this title, Heaney appropriates the reference and acknowledges Yeats as one of his singing-masters, while reminding us of their opposing political views.³⁷ In this choice of epigraph, Heaney establishes the tension between political and artistic fealty that defines 'Singing School' and reaches its conflicted conclusion in the final poem of the sequence, 'Exposure'.

³⁵ Rachel Buxton, *Robert Frost and Northern Irish Poetry*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 67.

³⁶ Jon Stallworthy, 'The Poet as Archaeologist: W.B. Yeats and Seamus Heaney', *The Review of English Studies*, New Series, 33 (130) (1982): 160; Heaney, *North*, 62.

³⁷ Stallworthy, 158.

‘Singing School’ is about violence, and terror, and the place of poetry within a context described by Heaney in its first poem as ruled by ‘the ministry of fear’.³⁸ Its first two poems are about the boy Heaney, first at boarding-school at St Columb’s College, with a view of Bogside, the site of Bloody Sunday, and secondly at home with his father when ‘A Constable Calls’ to record ‘tillage returns’.³⁹ The constable is Protestant, or so we assume, as he is a member of the Royal Ulster Constabulary, and armed with a revolver. The young Heaney is transfixed by ‘the polished holster’ on his hip, filled with dread and guilt during what should be a mundane agricultural exercise. The third poem in the sequence, ‘Orange Drums, Tyrone, 1966’, is a short poem marked, too, by a sense of fear, here induced by the sound of drums at a Protestant parade, whose ‘battered signature subscribes “No Pope”’.⁴⁰ ‘Summer 1969’, finds Heaney in Spain while the unrest in Ireland continues unabated. Everywhere around him in Madrid, Heaney senses home, and senses death: ‘stinks from the fishmarket’ are like ‘the reek off a flax-dam’, and the Spanish Guardia’s ‘patent leather ... gleam[s] like fish-bellies in flax-poisoned waters’. His guilt here, the guilt now of an adult and a poet, is profound, and felt most powerfully as he sits before Goya’s paintings in the Prado. The painter did what Heaney feels ever more pressured to do, but finds he cannot: ‘he painted with his fists and elbows, flourished / the stained cape of his heart as history charged’.

‘Fosterage’, the penultimate poem in the sequence, recounts Heaney’s meeting in 1962 with the Irish novelist Michael McLaverty and the advice of the older writer to Heaney – ‘Go your own way. / Do your own work.’. This, then, is what Heaney does, feeling ‘words / imposing on [his] tongue like obols’, feeling his responsibility to language and poetry outweighing, in this moment, the political responsibility and anxiety that has plagued him throughout ‘Singing School’. ‘Exposure’, finally, the only poem to be written in the present tense, brings us to Heaney at the time of writing in 1975. It is one of Heaney’s most famous poems, ‘a finely rueful self-portrait of the poet’, as Bloom describes it, as he considers his vocation, his isolation, and the question of the artist’s responsibility.⁴¹

³⁸ Seamus Heaney, *North*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1977), 63.

³⁹ Heaney, *North*, 66.

⁴⁰ Heaney, *North*, 68.

⁴¹ Bloom, 4.

As a result of these predominant themes, 'Exposure' is particularly interesting to consider in light of Heaney's defence of poetry, a defence motivated primarily by the charge brought against the art form by those for whom political considerations are uppermost. This poem from *North* deals with the question of political and poetic duty more saliently than any of Heaney's other poems, and as such it becomes an enactment in verse of the struggle to which Heaney bears witness in his prose writing. There is an important difference, and a perhaps unsurprising one, between the nature of that conflict in its prose and poetic forms. In his essays, as we have seen, while Heaney acknowledges consistently the difficulty of being a poet in a politically-defined society such as Ireland, he is concerned above all to argue that poetry itself overcomes those difficulties, defeats the oppositions which govern our daily lives. In 'Exposure', however, we see the challenges inherent in translating that argument into practice. Heaney has a much harder time of it here than in his essays, and he acknowledges, implicitly, that there are, ultimately, certain values that cannot be reconciled, even when the underlying melodies of the poem reach after a form of resolution. 'Exposure' underscores the fact, so well known in reality, whether in politics or poetry, that there is no easy translation of theory into practice; indeed, quite the contrary. At the same time, however, it illustrates the truth of Heaney's defence on one central point: namely, poetry's capacity not only to hold in one space two opposing forces, but also to offer reconciliation of those forces in an auditory, an inherently poetic manner, even as they remain irreconcilable in reality.

Anguish, the key-note of 'Exposure', is not a characteristic tone in either Heaney's poetry or prose, and, in fact, the sorts of emotions that govern the poem are not really his *métier* at all. The preceding poems in 'Singing School' establish Heaney's guilt surrounding his political and poetic choices, and 'Exposure' shows us the poet at the very moment when he most lacks confidence in himself, his art and his politics; he is displaced not only emotionally and spiritually, but also physically in his self-imposed exile in County Wicklow. The poem embodies writing, Seamus Deane argues, as both 'a form of guilt and a form of expiation from it', which is perhaps one way of describing the coexistence of musical resolution and actual irresolution.⁴² Heaney has his back to the

⁴² Seamus Deane, 'Seamus Heaney: the Timorous and the Bold', in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. M. Allen, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), 71.

wall here in a way which is rare in his work; but in rendering poetically such an unavoidably conflicted situation, he manifests the Keatsian notion of 'negative capability' – the capability of some (primarily, according to the Romantic poet, great writers) to flourish in the midst of uncertainty, to accept that there are irreconcilable difficulties in life.⁴³ His ability to do so in a manner that constitutes, perhaps, the only possible form of reconciliation available in such cases is testament both to his skill as a poet and to the strength of his defence. It is with the latter in mind that we turn, then, to the poem itself:

It is December in Wicklow:
alders dripping, birches
inheriting the last light,
the ash tree cold to look at.

A comet that was lost
should be visible at sunset,
those million tons of light
like a glimmer of haws and rose-hips,

and I sometimes see a falling star.
If I could come on meteorite!
Instead I walk through damp leaves,
husks, the spent flukes of autumn,

imagining a hero
on some muddy compound,
his gift like a slingstone
whirled for the desperate.

How did I end up like this?
I often think of my friends'
beautiful prismatic counselling
and the anvil brains of some who hate me

as I sit weighing and weighing
my responsible *tristia*.
For what? For the ear? For the people?
For what is said behind-backs?

⁴³ Keats qtd in Stuart M. Sperry, *Keats the Poet*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993), 61. Isaiah Berlin's theory of 'conflicting systems of value', explored in detail in Chapter 3, is once more relevant here.

Rain comes down through the alders,
its low conducive voices
mutter about let-downs and erosions
and yet each drop recalls

the diamond absolutes.
I am neither internee nor informer;
an inner émigré, grown long-haired
and thoughtful; a wood-kerne

escaped from the massacre,
taking protective colouring
from bole and bark, feeling
every wind that blows;

who, blowing up these sparks
in their meagre heat, have missed
the once-in-a-lifetime portent,
the comet's pulsing rose.⁴⁴

Like 'Singing School' as a whole, 'Exposure' deals, as I have said, with the poet's relationship to politics; but, unlike the preceding poems, it is set in a place empty of other people and of obvious political reference. The poem's title has numerous possible references: it refers to the revelation of the comet Kohoutek as well as to the poet's presence in an unprotected rural environment;⁴⁵ to Heaney's own raw self-exposure in the poem; to the involuntary exposure to the 'anvil brains' of his enemies and the media that he feels he is suffering as a writer, and particularly as an Irish writer.⁴⁶ Heaney is out walking in Wicklow, waiting to see a comet which will appear as the sun sets. The poem begins with both a sense of conclusion – it is the end of the year and it is winter – and one of isolation. Heaney's only companions are the trees, wet alders, pale birches whose bark is aglow in the last of the sunlight, and an ash tree to which Heaney transfers the epithet 'cold'. The significance of the comet in this setting is more than that of a passing beauty: in an environment characterised by cold and barrenness, 'those million tons of light' will appear to the watching poet as 'a glimmer of haws and rose-hips', an image of fruit, of

⁴⁴ Seamus Heaney, *North*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1975), 72.

⁴⁵ Bedford, 15.

⁴⁶ Corcoran, 80.

life and growth, the only hint of such possibility in this place. Even the shooting stars that he sees from time to time are an image of death, of ending, although one which inspires in him a longing to ‘come on meteorite’, thereby breaking free of his current situation.

The first word of the next line, however, brings both poet and reader back down to earth after the exclamation of that desire for freedom and distance: ‘instead’ of on meteorite, his feet move among soggy fallen leaves, an autumnal graveyard characterised by emptiness and desolation. The extent and aptness of Heaney’s use of natural imagery in ‘Exposure’ are frequently noted by critics of the poem. Waterman, for example, praises the way in which it ‘so felicitously makes natural landscape luminously symbolic of complex concepts and issues’ – this is no run-of-the-mill pathetic fallacy.⁴⁷ Heaney’s description of the fallen leaves and husks as autumn’s ‘spent flukes’ is the first of a series of images related to violence, each of which is heavy with symbolism. Here, he walks in the aftermath of a battle, among used and discarded arrowheads; even the peaceful country setting in which he now lives is tainted with his inner struggle, seen in its terms. Underlying this meaning of ‘fluke’ is another, namely ‘a stroke of luck’, and thus there is also a sense of missed opportunity in the line, which foreshadows the poem’s conclusion.

Heaney seeks to escape imaginatively – once again – from the pall of his surroundings by conjuring the poem’s second violent image, a biblical allusion, in one reading, to David and Goliath: he is

imagining a hero
on some muddy compound
his gift like a slingstone
whirled for the desperate.

The hero Heaney imagines here is himself, in the mud of this Wicklow forest, and his gift is his poetry; Parker suggests, too, that the reference to a ‘compound’ brings to mind the suffering of political prisoners (such as Heaney is in an entirely figurative sense), or, in retrospective readings, Osip Mandelstam, who features more obviously in later stanzas.⁴⁸ The poet longs for his writing, indeed, for his life, to achieve resolution and victory as

⁴⁷ Andrew Waterman, ““The best way out is always through””, in *Seamus Heaney: a Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. E. Andrews, (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1992), 22.

⁴⁸ Parker, 150.

simply and decisively as a stone striking the enemy's temple; in this isolated place, however, poetry seems to lack significance, and its force is never as straightforward as a physical equivalent. In comparison with a poem like 'Follower', 'Exposure', Edna Longley argues, 'falls a long way short of identifying the artist with the man of action'; the image of a hero creates a contrast between writer and warrior rather than convincingly establishing their likeness.⁴⁹ That, one might argue, is, however, only one kind of action, and in the achievement of the poem itself, Heaney produces an instance of another type of action, of accomplishment, altogether; one which is, if we take his defence into account in a reading of the poem, finally more effective than the action he describes – albeit for the purposes of metaphor – in 'Exposure'. Within the confines of this image, however, Longley's reading is correct: without the certainty of his beliefs as later expressed in prose, the writer cannot see how poetic activity can fulfil his responsibility to the helpless and undefended. He cannot believe, no matter how much he might desire to, that poetry can be as efficacious as the decisive, violent, political gesture of David.

Heaney's frustrated desires – to ride a shooting star and thus be removed from the gravitational pull of his circumstances, to use his talent as he might a weapon – give way at the start of the fifth stanza to the anguish that has been building from the first line of the poem. 'How did I end up like this?', he asks; how has he reached this unendurable position in spite of the counsel of his friends? Heaney depicts the advice of his associates as lucid and well-defined, composed of the clear planes and angles of a prism, refracting life into its complete spectrum of colours. Yet in this description of the advice as something purely visual, there is a sense, too, of distance; such counsel fails to help the poet, remaining a scheme, a plan, to which he is an audience, an observer, but in which he is not a participant. Of more help to Heaney are the 'low conducive voices' of the rain, two stanzas further. At this point, however, he is concerned equally with the seductive advice of his friends and with the criticism of his enemies. The two images he uses to depict these parties are wholly opposed to one another: the heavy, unyielding, iron 'anvil brains' of his detractors and the nuanced, complex spectra of his friends' 'prismatic counselling'. It is the latter that Seamus Deane identifies as responsible for the 'missed

⁴⁹ Edna Longley, "'Inner Émigré' or 'Artful Voyeur'?" Seamus Heaney's *North*, in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. M. Allen, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1997), 38.

visionary opportunity' in the poem: 'the rational or rationalising explanations of his friends, attempting to account for the political crisis and for Heaney's ... role within it' distract the poet from the vision that concludes the poem. I would argue that Heaney's glance away from the comet in the final stanza is not the consequence of oversight, of a momentary lapse of attention, but of a decision the agony of which he experiences throughout the poem.⁵⁰ The conflict between the voices of colleagues and those of his enemies is used to characterise, rather, Heaney's internal conflict as he contemplates, assesses, his obligations as man and as poet – his *tristia* – though neither chorus presents him with a solution.

'Tristia' is the title poem of a collection by Osip Mandelstam, in the preface to his translation of which Bruce McLelland explains the poet's choice of title and its meaning:

Tristia – 'sad things', 'sorrows' – is the condition of these poems not because of some personal ego loss ... The sadness of Mandelstam ... is the sadness of the alienated true poet, the one who has mastered language and its powers only to discover that his voice has not been heard above the rush of history's wave ... These are not 'sad' poems, as a whole ... But collectively, they convey the pain of an isolation caused by the maintenance of absolute integrity ...⁵¹

This is the isolation Heaney feels in 'Exposure'; and the sorrow, the burden of responsibility to more than one party that makes such isolation unavoidable, natural even, baffles him here, even as he recognises the necessity of that isolation to his poetry.⁵² For what final cause, he demands, is he suffering, is he responsible – poetry, politics, or to quell the judgments of those who hate him? Their sniping, gossip criticism shifts the scales in the weighing of that responsibility; even at this remove he is not immune to their depiction of him, and he cannot measure the degree to which he should submit himself to the downward pull, the impossible pressure of those people and their opinions. He, like Mandelstam, wants to retain an 'absolute integrity' in his poetry and in his humanity; in 'Exposure', he cannot see how the two can be synonymous, cannot yet conceive of a

⁵⁰ Seamus Deane, 'Powers of Earth and Visions of Air', in *Seamus Heaney: The Shaping Spirit*, ed. C. Mallow and P. Carey, (London: Associated University Presses, 1996), 31.

⁵¹ Bruce McLelland, 'Preface', in O. Mandelstam, *Tristia*, (New York: Station Hill Press, 1987), 1.

⁵² Parini, 'The Ground Possessed', 118. At a more distant historical moment, there is also present in this poem 'the figure of the exiled Ovid writing his Black Sea *Tristia*'. (Vendler, *Seamus Heaney*, 87.)

poetic integrity that will answer fully enough to the range of obligations he feels.⁵³ These questions are those with which, of course, Heaney deals so eloquently, ten years later, in *The Government of the Tongue*. He is caught here between his loyalties to song and suffering: is his ‘responsibility to sound rather than to the state’, as he puts it in that prose collection?⁵⁴ By the time Heaney publishes those essays, his questions have been answered; they are asked in ‘Exposure’, however, with fresh agony and uncertainty.

Then, in the seventh stanza of the poem, Heaney takes a step back from his *tristia*, from the pitch of his distress, to describe how

Rain comes down through the alders,
its low conducive voices
mutter about let-downs and erosions
and yet each drop recalls

the diamond absolutes.

The sound of the rain contrasts with the presumably fine-sounding advice of the poet’s peers, which, though lovely, is not helpful. In the rain falling through the trees, Heaney finds a kind of forthrightness that he admires: even as the raindrops acknowledge, perhaps even predict, difficulty and disappointment, they are reminiscent of the purity, the structure, the unyielding sureness of diamonds. There is a pun at work here in Heaney’s use of ‘let-downs and erosions’: the sound he hears is that of the drops falling through the tree branches, and as they wash into the ground they will erode it; those same movements also symbolise the failures and disintegrations of Heaney’s life. Where the raindrops, however, in their shape and substance, are reminiscent of something unwavering and untainted, Heaney himself struggles to lay claim to such certainties. The rain (like Goya in the earlier poem from ‘Singing School’) accomplishes what Heaney cannot: recognition of the deterioration and confusion that are part of living, as well as an ability to retain a sense of what is unchanging and uncompromising. Each raindrop embodies unproblematically a binary – disintegration and wholeness – which Heaney himself finds it impossible to attain; given what he has experienced of politics at its most

⁵³ McLelland, 1.

⁵⁴ Heaney, *Government*, xviii.

destructive, he cannot see that poetry might offer a coherence, a unity, adequate to the worst of life's chaos.

The contrast between Heaney and the diamond-sharp clarity of the rain is heightened by the way in which he goes on to describe himself, as existing in an in-between place that is a no-place: he is neither one thing nor another, and he is neither here nor there, slipping between trees, between identities. It is in this no-man's-land, however, that Heaney begins, in a small way, to find his direction, suggested by his use of the verb 'to be' in the second line of the eighth stanza – the only instance of it here in relation to the speaker. With its position in the line giving it added emphasis, and in light of the struggle for self that has been taking place, that 'I am' becomes an echo, however faint, of God's own 'I am', the original and omnipotent declaration of independent being. The best Heaney can manage at this point is to declare what he is *not*, but that assertion begins to delimit, by necessity, what he is and what he values; the incipient certainty in these lines (a certainty that does not find completion in the poem) is evident in the persistent push of the nasals in 'I **am** neither **inter**nee nor **in**former; / **an** **inner** émigré'. His loyalty is not to politics in whatever form, or to religion, or to society. He has a third loyalty, and 'Exposure' serves, in a sense, as his own declaration of independence, his statement of allegiance to another possibility – namely, what Paz calls 'the other voice', poetry itself in its position 'between revolution and religion'.⁵⁵

Heaney has not pledged fidelity to a cause at any cost, and neither has he betrayed one. Rather, he has turned inwards, towards that other voice, thus distancing himself from the political conflict around him. Like Osip Mandelstam, he is 'within the state yet removed from it', and the extent of that withdrawal is demonstrated in his external changes: he becomes scruffy and preoccupied, creating a sense of time passing without his intervention or involvement.⁵⁶ In an interview with George Morgan, Heaney has described the sense in which he uses the phrase 'inner émigré' here:

⁵⁵ Paz, 151.

⁵⁶ Maurice Harmon, "'We pine for ceremony': Ritual and Reality in the Poetry of Seamus Heaney", in *Seamus Heaney: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. E. Andrews, (New York: St Martin's Press, 1992), 85. 'Inner émigré' is a variation on an expression used by the Soviet authorities to refer to, for example, Mandelstam and Anna Akhmatova, who were branded 'internal émigrés'. (Parker, 150.)

I meant to suggest a state of poetic stand-off, as it were, a state where you have slipped out of your usual social persona and have entered more creatively and fluently into your inner being. I think it is necessary to shed, at least to some extent, the social profile that you maintain elsewhere. 'Inner émigré' once had a specific meaning, of course, in the 1920s and 30s in Soviet Russia. It referred to someone who had not actually gone into exile but who lived at home disaffected from the system. Well, to some extent that was true of myself. Certainly, in relation to Northern Ireland.⁵⁷

The description of the poet's unkemptness leads into the following image – that of a 'wood-kerne', one of the semi-nomadic people living in 'the Debatable Land between Scotland and England' in the sixteenth century, surviving by violence and theft.⁵⁸ This third image of physical force in the poem, of 'the massacre', is one from which Heaney is fleeing, seeking to avoid exposure so he does not stand out and is not attacked. In identifying with his natural surroundings, he inherits the strength, the endurance, of the organic – which is, of course, one of his characteristic poetic themes. The sound and fury of literary-political debate no longer interest the poet; he has found it impossible to situate himself within the conflict, and has instead retreated into the Wicklow woodland to suffer the sequestration of Mandelstam.⁵⁹ His retreat in 'Exposure' has not been effected without anxiety, however: he seeks imaginative protection from his surroundings, and he experiences every breeze as a threat. Furthermore, he cannot avoid a sense of responsibility for those who did not manage to flee from the massacre, his own kind of survivor's guilt.⁶⁰

Heaney's final vision of himself in the poem is not a coherent one, and nor is it a consolatory one for the reader; it could not be otherwise given the trajectory of the poem. While Heaney has been gathering together this poem, coaxing it into life, he has

... missed

⁵⁷ Seamus Heaney, interview by George Morgan, *Cycnos* 15.2, July 9, 2008.

<http://revel.unice.fr/cycnos/document.html?id=1594> (November 25, 2008).

⁵⁸ John Derek, 'The Image of Ireland', Edinburgh University Library Online.

<http://www.lib.ed.ac.uk/about/bgalleries/Gallery/researchcoll/ireland.html> (July 12, 2007).

⁵⁹ McLelland, 1. Heaney finds himself in a position similar to that of the protagonist in J.M. Coetzee's *Life and Times of Michael K*, a character 'described as a stone', who 'embodies what the Jewish philosopher Abraham Heschel once called 'the quiet eminence of being', a quality that stands as a perpetual rebuke to the frenzied participants in historical struggles'. (Stephen Watson, 'Colonialism and the Novels of J.M. Coetzee', in *Selected Essays 1980-1990*, (Cape Town: Carrefour Press, 1990), 50.)

⁶⁰ Parker, 150.

the once-in-a-lifetime portent,
the comet's pulsing rose.

Eyes downcast as he composes, as he measures his obligations in 'Exposure', Heaney has forfeited his one chance to see the comet's sign, to witness its meaning. Once more, that asteroid is the only part of his surroundings described in vital terms; here, it is a 'rose', a flower both alluring and throbbing with a heartbeat, a life, of its own, a beat established by the three iambs that constitute the line. There is life, too, and hence promise, however slight, however overlooked, in Heaney's description of his modest act of creation, a description that echoes the final lines of Eugenio Montale's 'Little Testament':

Each man knows his own: pride
was not flight, humility was not
cowardice, that faint glow catching fire
beneath was not the striking of a match.⁶¹

Poetry, in 'Exposure', is an indistinct glimmer, a pale reflection of the comet and what it represents – wasted opportunities, perhaps a missed message or directive – but it has, nonetheless, a radiance of its own; moreover, it is begun and sustained by Heaney himself while he is, as Harmon suggests, 'about the proper business of the poet'.⁶² There is both loss and resignation in the final lines of 'Exposure', but there is also a helpless commitment to something from which Heaney cannot separate himself; he regrets having missed the comet, but he does not and cannot despise the small fire he has lit instead. The attentiveness implied by the image of a man crouched over a tiny blaze, feeding its flames with his breath, is a warmer, more intimate image than that of the distant asteroid. The latter neither shares its heat nor needs the care, or indeed attention, of anyone at all to sustain itself, even as it remains a magnificent, luminous vision. The difference between these two fires, the celestial and the terrene, is a measure of the sacrifices it is necessary for Heaney the poet to make: the distance between the one and the other forces a choice on the writer that cannot be ignored, and cannot be resolved in compromise.

⁶¹ Eugenio Montale, *The Storm and Other Things*, trans. William Arrowsmith, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1985), 159.

⁶² Harmon, 85.

Along with the loss, the unsatisfied longing of the final stanza, however, there is a sense, embodied in the cadence of the lines, of a climax being reached, a consummation like that created by all effective acts of closure. The approach of the comet is adumbrated by the word 'blows' in the fourth line of the penultimate stanza, which will rhyme, as the poem concludes, with 'rose', and that rhyme, not least, brings the poem to a rhythmically logical finish. The subordinate clauses that begin, in the third stanza from the end, to amass, allow the poem to gather a steady momentum until its last syllable – its lingering diphthong and the delicate flicker of its final consonant – sounds; until the heartbeat of the comet, embodied in the alliteration of 'comet's pulsing rose', fades from sight and hearing. And it is in this visual and aural display of the comet's arrival and departure that the poem reaches another kind of resolution. The reader, unlike Heaney, does not miss the comet, but senses its approach in the tempo and music of the poem, and then watches it pass over the writer's bent head; and the possibility of our being witness to the omen which the poet himself has missed is crucial to what lies at the very centre of poetry's accomplishments. The reality of the poet's situation is one of being caught between two incommensurable demands, and the wisdom of his choice at the end – no matter how involuntarily that choice is made – is evidenced by the power of this poem to allow the reader, though not the poet, to gaze upon both the tiny fire and the blazing comet.

That power is, of course, one of the defining characteristics of poetry in Heaney's defence of the art form: the ability to transcend the limitations of the actual, and of the personal, through an independent set of operations. 'Exposure' is exemplary of the way in which poetry does this while matching the complexity and difficulty of our lived experiences, without resorting to wish-fulfilment or fantasy. Even as it deals with failure and uncertainty, however, it provides a poetic response adequate to the experience, an answer given most effectively and clearly when the poem is most natural and least self-conscious, when the tongue is allowed to govern. In the shifting and balancing of Heaney's images in 'Exposure', so evocative of the shifting and weighing of his guilt and responsibility, we see that very naturalness, and hear the stammering hesitation of the poet through the certainty and decisiveness of his artistic tongue; we see, too, his inclination, and the unstoppable inclination of the poem itself, towards resolution, towards equilibrium of a distinctly poetic kind. 'Exposure' is most inevitable, most

indispensable, in its final three stanzas, which move into each other with the unfettered momentum of genuinely achieved poetry. Here is poetry's self-justifying capacity at full stretch, and in its bringing of the poem to a close even as the dilemma of the poet remains unresolved – and, indeed, in the very nature of that dilemma – 'Exposure' becomes Heaney's version of Zbigniew Herbert's 'To Ryszard Krynicki – a Letter':⁶³

Not much will remain Ryszard really not much
of the poetry of this insane century certainly Rilke Eliot
a few other distinguished shamans who knew the secret
of conjuring a form with words that resists the action of time without which
no phrase is worth remembering and speech is like sand

those school notebooks of ours sincerely tormented
with traces of sweat tears blood will be
like the text of a song without music for the eternal proofreader
honourably righteous more than obvious

too easily we came to believe beauty does not save
that it leads the lighthearted from dream to dream to death
none of us knew how to awaken the dryad of a poplar
to read the writing of clouds
this is why the unicorn will not cross our tracks
we won't bring to life a ship in the bay a peacock a rose
only nakedness remained for us and we stand naked
on the right the better side of the triptych
the Last Judgment

we took public affairs on our thin shoulders
recording suffering the struggle with tyranny with lying
but – you have to admit – we had opponents despicably small
so it was worth it to lower holy speech
to the babble of the speaker's platform the black foam of the newspapers

in our poems Ryszard there is so little joy – daughter of the gods
too few luminous dusks mirrors wreaths of rapture
nothing but dark psalmodes stammering of animulae
urns of ashes in the burned garden

in spite of fate the verdicts of history human misdeeds
what strength is needed to whisper
in the garden of betrayal – a silent night

⁶³ Zbigniew Herbert, *Report from the Besieged City and Other Poems*, trans. John and Bogdana Carpenter, (New York: The Ecco Press), 21-22.

what strength of spirit is needed to strike
beating blindly with despair against despair
a spark of light word of reconciliation

so the dancing circle will last forever on the thick grass
so the birth of a child and every beginning is blessed
gifts of air earth and fire and water

this I don't know – my friend – and is why
I am sending you these owl's puzzles in the night
a warm embrace
greetings from my shadow

Like 'Exposure', Herbert's poem ends in a perfectly resolved irresolution, an irresolution so expressed as to allow the poem to become as satisfyingly 'resolved' as any in which closure is unproblematically achieved. 'Exposure' is a series of weights and balances, of elements redressing each other continually – most obviously in Heaney's measuring of his responsibility and sorrow, but present also in the different voices that plague him, his various self-depictions (and self-deprecations) and, finally, the unlikely choice of a small, sheltered fire over a massive astral flame. This final imbalance, the impossibility of Heaney's ultimate position, are like Herbert's 'owl's puzzles', which reveal far more to us about art, life and the poet himself than a complacent solution to the problem would have done.

'Exposure' is generally recognised as one of Heaney's most accomplished works, but the nature of that achievement differs from critic to critic; they are understandably varied in their reading of the poem's conclusion. There are those, like Waterman, who suggest that Heaney's dilemma is resolved right from the outset – the poem itself, crafted and contained, implies by its very existence a resolution having been reached in the mind of the poet, a position attained from which he might comfortably consider the difficulties he once faced.⁶⁴ Others, like Morrison, see no neat or foregone resolution in the poem; 'but for all its tentativeness', he writes, it 'does seem to move towards a position of

⁶⁴ Waterman, 21.

strength: irresolution but independence'. Harmon, similarly, describes 'Exposure' as 'a drama of internal irresolution, in which much is revealed and little is resolved'.⁶⁵

Certainly, within the poetic and musical closure of the poem's concluding lines there remains, as in 'Limbo', an apparently irresolvable paradox, a sense of the impossibility of Heaney both seeing the comet and tending his own small flame. The problem of his position in relation to each cannot be solved, the two cannot be reconciled, and, finally, Heaney cannot pay what he considers his dues both to his compatriots and to his art form; he cannot look both ways at once, and he has known this from the first step of his walk through the woods. Elmer Andrews describes Heaney's distance from his home and kin as allowing him a wider, less inescapably subjective perspective on the matters at hand; even at that remove, however, he cannot free his imagination from reality, and hence he cannot escape to the comet, even by gazing at it. The 'ideal of imaginative integrity' which he has been chasing remains out of reach, remains essentially idealistic.⁶⁶ Andrews fails to realise, however, that Heaney never seeks that kind of imaginative liberty in the writing of his poetry, even as he may express a longing for it; his defence of poetry emphasises time and again the importance of a relationship between reality and the imagination, and his notion of imaginative integrity incorporates an inextricable link with the actual. This link, though represented in 'Exposure' as a burden (and no doubt felt by Heaney, at this stage in his life, precisely thus) is part of the balance he later requires of poetry. No matter the difficulties of achieving that equilibrium, he will not – even here, even in the midst of the struggle – sacrifice it for complete imaginative freedom and hence irrelevance. Without that burden as experienced by him, without the ineluctable draw of the sparks and twigs at his feet, the reader's view, like his, would be limited to the comet itself: a mesmerising, ultimately unsatisfying vision of beauty.

V

'Exposure' is a kind of self-elegy; but Heaney's body of work is characterised as well by more conventional instances of the form. In his 1987 collection *The Haw Lantern*, he

⁶⁵ Blake Morrison, 'The Hedge-School: *Field Work*', in *Seamus Heaney*, ed. H. Bloom, (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 1986), 128; Harmon, 84.

⁶⁶ Andrews, 'Spirit's Protest', 216.

published a sequence of eight sonnets in memory of his mother, entitled 'Clearances', sonnets which would become some of the most popular of his elegies. The poems collapse the intervening years between moments from Margaret Heaney's earlier life and the days around her death, juxtaposing the most memorable (for her son), most vivid experiences of her life with the experience of her death. In this sequence, Heaney brings together, also, two of his familiar domains, the domestic and the religious, both in harmony and in opposition. The title of the poem comes from the penultimate sonnet, in which Heaney describes the moment of his mother's death and the moment just after, when

The space we stood around had been emptied
into us to keep, it penetrated
clearances that suddenly stood open.
High cries were felled and a pure change happened.⁶⁷

The rendering of that 'pure change' in poetry, the artistic coming-to-grips with the fact of someone's death, make the elegiac form the ultimate achievement, as it were, of redress: a poem of mourning that, in its very composition, its form and music, seeks to repair the absence of the one mourned. The reality and its alternative that are contained in the elegy are nothing less than death and life, a concluded existence and a continuing one; as Deane describes it, the form grieves even as it conjures the absent one, manages to hold in a single space the two opposite forces that define human existence, and pay each one due respect.⁶⁸ By their very nature, therefore – their elegance as achieved poems notwithstanding – the sonnets from 'Clearances' are examples of poetry redressing, repairing, an intolerable reality.

The focus of those sonnets is, in large part, the effortless, unexpressed intimacy between mother and son as recalled by Heaney, a closeness embodied in the sequence by their sharing of chores around the house. These domestic duties take on an emotional significance, a 'precious radiance', as Parker calls it, for the young Heaney.⁶⁹ In the third

⁶⁷ Seamus Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1987), 31.

⁶⁸ Deane, 'The Timorous and the Bold', 71.

⁶⁹ Parker, 3.

sonnet of the sequence, the one which I will be discussing, mother and son are described working quietly together in the kitchen, in a scene suffused with that radiance:

When all the others were away at Mass
I was all hers as we peeled potatoes.
They broke the silence, let fall one by one
like solder weeping off the soldering iron:
cold comforts set between us, things to share
gleaming in a bucket of clean water.
And again let fall. Little pleasant splashes
from each other's work would bring us to our senses.

So while the parish priest at her bedside
went hammer and tongs at the prayers for the dying
and some were responding and some crying
I remembered her head bent towards my head,
her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
never closer the whole rest of our lives.⁷⁰

In keeping with the Petrarchan sonnet form, there is a clear turning point in this poem, at which there is a shift across time – we move from Margaret Heaney's kitchen, in which the boy Heaney helps her peel potatoes, into her home many years on, as she lies on her deathbed. The octave establishes an intimacy between mother and son in its opening two lines, and the repetition of 'all' emphasises the companionship of mother and son to the exclusion of everyone else. Together, they peel potatoes, and the rest of the octave focuses on those vegetables as Heaney uses them to demonstrate the closeness that, for him, defines this memory. This is a closeness created without language – the potatoes, dropping one at a time, interrupt a silence which is allowed to settle between the pair as they work. Heaney compares the potatoes being dropped from their hands into the water to 'solder weeping off the soldering iron', an image conveying both the movement of the potatoes slipping from their hands and Heaney's sense of the activity uniting him with his mother, joining them together as solder would two fragments of metal. Welch describes the world of the poem as 'a world transformed and translated from singleness and separateness, to integrity' through the depiction of 'total absorption and trance', a state

⁷⁰ Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, 27.

that lasts until the poem's volta.⁷¹ There are already hints of what is to come: 'weeping' clearly foreshadows the 'crying' and mourning years on as his mother dies. There is a quietness, a dignity to 'weeping', however, that is characteristic of the scene as a whole, with its intervals of silence disturbed only by the soft splashing of the potatoes.

Heaney's choice of 'cold comforts' as a description for those potatoes, while being a pun on the coldness of the potatoes themselves, also reveals that the relationship between mother and son is not wholly and consistently close; their chore unites them, but the outer harmony of activity does not translate into a consistent equal harmony of thought and feeling. There is evidence of the complexity of the mother and son relationship in the next sonnet of 'Clearances', in which Heaney describes how his mother's sense of the gap between her education – embodied in her speech – and that of her poet son manifested itself in an affectation of ignorance when it came to 'pronouncing words "beyond her"'. As a consequence, Heaney 'governed [his] tongue / in front of her', and would 'decently relapse into the wrong / grammar which kept us allied and at bay'.⁷² The sense of concord being achieved and discord, perhaps, being withheld or avoided by the act of peeling potatoes in the third sonnet is here confirmed, and indeed strengthened; Heaney's compromise, the government of his tongue, is a cold comfort that maintains the equilibrium of his relationship with his mother. Notably, the harmony accomplished in that third poem is also achieved through distinctly non-linguistic means, in a silence that dominates even the clamour of the sestet. By contrast with the following sonnet in the sequence, however, in the potato-peeling poem in 'Clearances' the overwhelming impression is one of intimacy, of mutual affection and enjoyment; the chilly compromise of the potatoes is the only discordant note sounded.

There is, moreover, a purity to the scene (a result not least of the pair's silence) that seems to distil from it an innocent, archetypal closeness quite lovely: the potatoes shine in the bucket of water, and their white glow, their coldness and the cleanness of the water reflect the simplicity and naturalness of the bond between mother and son. In an earlier poem dedicated to his mother, Heaney once again surrounds her with clean, light, elemental objects:

⁷¹ Welch, 180.

⁷² Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, 28.

There was a sunlit absence.
The helmeted pump in the yard
heated its iron,
water honeyed

in the slung bucket
and the sun stood
like a griddle cooling
against the wall ...

... And here is love
like a tinsmith's scoop
sunk past its gleam
in the meal-bin.⁷³

Here the gleaming scoop, unseen beneath the grain, is a symbol of love, precisely the feeling evoked by the gleam of the submerged potatoes in 'Clearances'. In both poems, love is associated with work, with domesticity and food – with baking in 'Sunlight', and with peeling potatoes in 'Clearances'. In the latter, however, the work is shared by Heaney and his mother as they peel and release the potatoes; and just as the sound of the potatoes falling into the bucket rouses the pair from their reverie, so the reader is brought to his or her senses by the repetition of 'let fall' in the penultimate line of the octet. In the time since Heaney described the dropped vegetables first breaking the silence, while he has been contemplating the clear water and the bright potatoes, another one has been peeled and has plopped into the water. There is a strong impression of parent and child being brought together by their work, and yet remaining sunk in separate contemplation; the silence between them is comfortable, the silence of two people with their own thoughts, and it is this very separateness that unites them. They are startled from their reflection by 'each other's work', and there is thus a rhythm to their private thinking and to their awareness of one another. Heaney portrays, in this poem, one of those 'sacred' moments of silent communion between two people sharing a common task, which, in the sharing of it, enables them to express a love otherwise unspoken or else inexpressible.

⁷³ 'Sunlight' from 'Mossbawn: Two Poems in Dedication', in Heaney, *The Haw Lantern*, ix-x, lines 1-8 and 25-28.

Until the beginning of the sestet, the first stanza of the poem seems an isolated, self-contained description of a memory clearly precious to Heaney. The 'so' which introduces the turn of the poem, however, makes us aware that that memory has become the reason for something else, has had some more lasting impact on Heaney than simply the recollection of a particularly close moment; that effect, as we discover, is to decide the way in which he mourns his mother, to locate his grief at her passing. In the second stanza of the poem, he remembers the house filled with people as his mother lay on her deathbed, a scene of chaos and noise. The hubbub of the last rites and the loud participation of those gathered at the house stand in stark contrast to the silence of the first stanza. The clanging, unyielding 'hammer and tongs' are weighed against the molten, softer metal on the soldering iron, and the 'crying' of those present drowns out in volume, if not in import, the voiceless 'weeping' of the solder, the potatoes. The quiet of the octet, broken only by occasional splashes, is here replaced by ceaseless, unbroken noise, and the wordlessness of Heaney and his mother is replaced by prayers and replies to the last rites. In the midst of this, Heaney turns to the memory he has just described:

I remembered her head bent towards my head,
her breath in mine, our fluent dipping knives –
never closer the whole rest of our lives.

The companionship, the closeness of the first stanza is summoned immediately, fully, by this description of mother's and son's heads bent together; the distance between the adult Heaney and his dying mother, expressed in the cacophony of her final moments, is instantly closed by this reminder of their physical – and not verbal – proximity. That intimacy is emphasised by the following two images, which, like the first, establish the two as reflections of each other as they work. Their heads bend towards each other, their breath mingles, and their knives work in rhythm together: they cooperate as do the mirror image and the real person. The fluency of the knives provides a further contrast with the inarticulate clamour of the priest and mourners; there is a grace and dignity to the silent conversation of those implements which is lacking in the frantic praying and wailing of those about to be bereaved. And it is in the memory of this silence, in which they were closer than ever before or since, that Heaney finds comfort, finds redemption.

The final note sounded by the third sonnet of 'Clearances' is an appropriately elegiac balance of comfort and bereavement, of sorrow and tranquillity. At its conclusion, what should have been a lament becomes a lullaby; becomes, in fact, a love poem. There is also a deep sense of poignancy, however, in the admission that the peeling of Sunday potatoes should have been the closest moment experienced between mother and son. This, like the question of language in the next sonnet in 'Clearances', complicates, however much in passing, however slightly, what would otherwise be a straightforward poem of loss and remembrance. In doing so, this line – like the 'cold comforts' of the first stanza – becomes one of the ways in which Heaney ensures the honesty, the coordination with the actual, of his poem: he does not simplify, does not reduce, and avoids the nostalgic sentiment that must always tempt the elegy-writer. It is for this reason, of course, that the poem is able to redress the reality of his loss as fully as it does. Death, as Corcoran argues, remains an unwanted event in the poem, remains the dread event it must always be in reality, but it becomes, poetically, also a 'necessary enlargement of imaginative capacity', an enlargement enacted in the poem's final lines as they manage both to console and to desolate. Heaney establishes a perspective from which death is more than simply loss and destruction, and he does so without recourse to the transcendent; his only recourse is to poetry itself.⁷⁴ Religion appears in the poem, in fact, only as another kind of distancing noise between mother and son: in the octet, it is away from the recitation of mass that they find the silence of their greatest intimacy, and in the sestet the imposition of the deathbed rites is one of discord, of tumult.

The manner in which Heaney captures that intense intimacy throughout the poem turns our expectations of the sonnet on their head, and the poem becomes a form of redress in its ability to direct our attention in unexpected ways. In the context of a sequence with the epigraph 'In memoriam M.K.H., 1911-1984', we do not expect to encounter what amounts to upliftment. Heaney, showing himself master of the elegy, accomplishes its most essential purpose: the poem creates a powerful sense of lasting presence, of unbroken communion, and this redirects not only our expectations of the poem, but also our own feelings of bereavement and loneliness. At another level, it turns our focus away from itself. The main conflict in the sonnet is between the silence of the

⁷⁴ Corcoran, 158.

kitchen and the pandemonium of the mourning household, and in figurative and literal terms (that is, in the sheer number of lines allotted to celebration of it), the silence dominates. The poem is a verbal artefact; it is a noise on the page; and Heaney uses this noise – no matter how beautiful its music – to point us and himself back to silence and wordlessness, back to the primitive intimacy of things shared without words. The poem redresses its own resonance by gesturing towards silence with all the force fourteen lines can muster.⁷⁵

The contradiction inherent in such an action – the evocation of silence through fundamentally acoustic means – is typical of the oppositions which, Heaney argues, can be surmounted by poetry at full stretch, and in ‘Clearances’ we find that argument bolstered by his own practice. The third sonnet in the sequence is, like any elegy, a lament; it is a poem motivated by sorrow and loss. That lament is not, however, plangent or whimpering in tone, and does not rely on the familiar music of sadness, the hitched breath of sobbing or even the slow progress of the dirge. Instead, it has all the dignified quietude of the potato-peeling scene it recalls. The opening stanza of the poem follows an aabb rhyme scheme, but the rhymes are slant rhymes – ‘Mass / potatoes’, ‘one / iron’, ‘share / water’, ‘splashes / senses’ – and they are appropriate here not only as a way of maintaining the ‘silence’ by preventing the dominant chime of exact rhyme, but also as a phonetic counterpart to the inexact relationship Heaney describes, a relationship in which both parties find their greatest intimacy, their communion, in the separation implied by that ‘silence’. The opening lines of the octet, already noted for their repetition of ‘all’, are echoes of one another:

When **all** the others were away at Mass
I was **all** hers as we peeled potatoes.

‘Hers’ rhymes internally with ‘others’; ‘away’ and ‘at’ alliterate (though imprecisely) as ‘peeled’ and ‘potatoes’ do. The stanza as a whole is filled with these echoes, primarily in the form of alliteration and repetition. I have already mentioned the recurrence of ‘let fall’ (the very action, of course, that these duplications mimic); the potatoes are like ‘solder weeping off the soldering iron’, and they are also ‘cold comforts’ between

⁷⁵ Heaney, *Redress*, 15.

mother and son. There is less audible alliteration, owing to the function words, on ‘**and** again’ and ‘**work would**’. Heaney initiates a string of assonances in the second line of the poem, sounding from ‘**peeled**’ through ‘**weeping**’, ‘**between**’ and ‘**gleaming**’ to ‘**clean**’, a thread of high-pitched, softly keening music that holds the stanza together.

The sestet, with the partial exception of ‘bedside / head’, consists of a full rhyme on ‘dying / crying’ and ‘knives / lives’, which serves two purposes. Firstly, the stanza as a whole resonates at a greater volume than the first because of the full rhyme: it has none of the quietness of the octet, and in this way it mimics the noise it describes. Secondly, perhaps more interestingly, it manages to reaffirm and strengthen the closeness described by Heaney in the octet, as well as the almost talismanic power of that memory for the poet as an adult. Even as we hear the wailing concomitant with ‘dying’ and ‘crying’, we are aware that it is bested by the quietness of the ‘fluent dipping knives’ that bring the pair nearer than ever as the poem concludes. This contrast between the two occasions is made clearer by the presence, in the first lines of the sestet, of the same repetition that punctuates the octet. Here we find ‘**some** were responding and **some** crying’ as the ‘**parish priest**’ prayed, and in line 12, Heaney depicts ‘her **head** bent towards my **head**’, playing one scene off against the other through structural parallelism.

This sonnet from ‘Clearances’ is, like ‘Limbo’, not one of Heaney’s richest poems in terms of the almost overabundant music he is capable of producing, and with good reason; it is an example of perfect harmony between theme and score. The way his images cohere, not only with each other, but also with the poem’s music, shapes the poem into something which seems wholly predestined. Its pitch modulates appropriately between octet and sestet, and somehow the poem leaves an impression of nothing so much as the potential warmth and expressiveness of silence in the face of even the profoundest and most complex of emotions – love. This is Heaney at his quiet, exquisite best, enabling us, and himself, to achieve in the face of loss what Wallace Stevens called ‘*Seelenfriede durch Dichtung*’: ‘soul-peace through poetry’.⁷⁶

VI

⁷⁶ Qtd in Critchley, 89.

The Spirit Level, like many of Heaney's collections, is characterised by a unity of purpose, a particular poetic discourse established and maintained throughout; its fluency of theme is emphasised by the sense of a dialogue existing between the poems themselves, an exchange of energy and ideas.⁷⁷ Two such poems – 'St Kevin and the Blackbird' and 'Whitby-Sur-Moyola' – find their narrative in Celtic legends, and their telling begins as though mid-conversation. In the former, Heaney narrates the story of that Catholic saint in whose palm, legend has it, a blackbird landed one day while he was praying and made its nest:⁷⁸

Kevin feels the warm eggs, the small breast, the tucked
neat head and claws and, finding himself linked
into the network of eternal life,

is moved to pity: now he must hold his hand
like a branch out in the sun and rain for weeks
until the young are hatched and fledged and flown.⁷⁹

The poem begins abruptly, with the word 'and', implying something preceding; and it seems part, perhaps, of a series of such myths, even though it is the first such poem we encounter in *The Spirit Level*. It is not the last, however. Twenty pages on, 'Whitby-Sur-Moyola' starts just as suddenly, the first line's 'too' implying that the poem is in addition to some other anecdote, with a description of the 'original' English poet, Caedmon, who is commonly associated with Whitby. That cowhand-poet, blessed (or cursed) with the gift of poetry, becomes in Heaney's interpretation of the legend an incarnation, a potent symbol, of the binary that is, as we have seen, central to his conception of poetry's internal processes: the earthly and the spiritual. For this reason, not least, it is instructive to examine the poem, which is one of Heaney's lesser-known, indeed hardly acknowledged, works; the fact that Heaney himself is the son of a

⁷⁷ The most obvious example of another such collection would be *Station Island*, with its long central sequence echoed and recalled in the accompanying poems; *North*, too, has a marked coherence of theme and style.

⁷⁸ 'Kevin', Patron Saints Index. <http://www.catholic-forum.com/saints/saintk02.htm> (August 15, 2007).

⁷⁹ Seamus Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, (London: Faber & Faber, 1996), 20.

‘cowman’, from a thoroughly rural background, also makes his subject here particularly significant, I will argue, as an instance of redress.⁸⁰

Caedmon too I was lucky to have known,
back *in situ* there with his full bucket
and armfuls of clean straw, the perfect yardman,
unabsorbed in what he had to do
but doing it perfectly, and watching you.
He had worked his angel stint. He was hard as nails
and all that time he’d been poeting with the harp
his real gift was the big ignorant roar
he could still let out of him, just bogging in
as if the sacred subjects were a herd
that had broken out and needed rounding up.
I never saw him once with his hands joined
unless it was a case of eyes to heaven
and the quick sniff and test of fingertips
after he’d passed them through a sick beast’s water.
Oh, Caedmon was the real thing all right.⁸¹

The story of Caedmon is originally told by Bede in his *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, where the historian describes him as ‘particularly glorified and honoured with a divine gift, in that he fittingly was accustomed to make songs’.⁸² Heaney, in his poem, does not narrate the myth as he has earlier in the case of St Kevin – rather, he speaks of Caedmon after the point where the traditional story concludes. In Bede’s version, Caedmon was a farmhand, a ‘perfect yardman’ as Heaney would have it, and a man who knew no songs. One night at a feast, when it was custom for all to sing together to the accompaniment of the harp, Caedmon retreated in shame to the stables and fell asleep:

... then some man stood by him in his dream and hailed and greeted him and addressed him by his name: ‘Caedmon, sing me something.’ Then he answered and said: ‘I do not know how to sing and for that reason I went out from this feast and went hither, because I did not know how to sing at all.’ Again he said, he who was speaking with him: ‘Nevertheless, you must sing.’ Then he said: ‘What must

⁸⁰ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 4-5.

⁸¹ Heaney, *The Spirit Level*, 41.

⁸² Benjamin Slade, trans. *Bede’s Story of Caedmon* (from *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* book IV chapter xxiv), 2003. <http://www.heorot.dk/bede-caedmon.html> (August 14, 2007.)

I sing?’ Said he: ‘Sing to me of the first Creation.’ When he received this answer, then he began immediately to sing in praise of God the Creator ...⁸³

In ‘Whitby-Sur-Moyola’, Heaney identifies with Caedmon, who comes to represent the poet as Heaney sees him at this stage in his career, and as he struggled to see him in earlier poems like ‘Follower’ – as a worker, a rough, strong, grubby farmworker such as those among whom Heaney grew up. Caedmon, as both poet and farmer, becomes a metaphor for poetry as labour, and by extension for poetry as something worth doing.

In the opening line, Heaney establishes the speaker, someone fortunate enough to have met Caedmon and whose role in the poem is to share his observations of the man with the reader. He seems, from his language and expressive style, to be of the same background as the man he describes – that is, a rural, uneducated background – and he speaks as Caedmon’s neighbour might, with familiarity and assuredness, about Caedmon’s habits and manner. He discusses the poet in the aftermath of his time as an angelic agent, a poet for God, when he is back at home on his farm doing the work of a herder and cattle-man. There, the poet is once more in the place in which he best belongs, and we sense his expertise and belonging there from the very earliest lines of the poem. He is ideally suited to his work, and he gets the job done without hesitation or error, skilled enough at it that he is not preoccupied by his tasks, but able to give consideration to his surroundings. In the first five lines of the poem, Heaney’s descriptions of Caedmon are deistic: the ‘full bucket’ and ‘clean straw’ take us back to the stable of Christ’s birth and also the overflowing cup of Psalm 23; twice in those few lines he and his actions are described as ‘perfect’; and even as he labours, he is able to observe those around him without faltering in his work. In the rest of the poem, however, this metaphor is inverted, and his activities during the period of his sacred poetic vocation are compared to the coarse, corporeal business of his life among his herds.

The second section is introduced with the statement that ‘he was hard as nails’, the ‘nails’ in this context also a passing reminder of God, of the spiritual; but the spiritual clad in flesh. Despite his calling to sing God’s praises, to be foremost among poets, Caedmon’s most exceptional talents, the speaker tells us, lay in the managing of his yard and beasts. His divine gift with words is overshadowed here by a ‘superior’ talent, the

⁸³ Slade.

wordless yell he would use to control his herds and which formed part of his artistic expression, too; he brought that shout to his worship, treating the spiritual matters of his poetry as he did his cows, corralling them into verse. Heaney's use of 'bogged in' conveys not just the unthinking, natural enthusiasm of Caedmon's noise, but also the agricultural, mucky setting in which he is most comfortable, which defines him regardless of his circumstances, and where he is so much at ease that his roar is itself an embodiment of that setting.

The final image in 'Whitby-Sur-Moyola' is an even stronger inversion of our expectations of the poet in his role as sacred speaker, and one which further emphasises the profoundly terrestrial way in which Heaney conceives of one part of the poetic act. The closest posture to that of prayer assumed by Caedmon, and recounted by the narrator, is as he tests by smell the urine of a sick animal, his fingertips together and his eyes raised heavenwards as he assesses the reek and feel of the liquid. Here the chasm between the notion of the divinely-gifted poet making music with his harp, and the rough, crude labourer is at its greatest: communion with God is replaced by communion with the basest functions of the body.⁸⁴ The poem concludes immediately after this image, however, with a declaration that 'Oh, Caedmon was the real thing all right'. The real what, we ask? This conclusion has been reached via the deliberately worldly, decidedly untranscendent picture of Caedmon that precedes it; which aspect of his life is the speaker affirming as genuine?

The answer, of course, is that he is 'real' in a number of ways that Heaney sees here (and in his prose) as complementary, but which in previous collections he has battled to reconcile. The concluding lines of 'Digging', in which Heaney states his intention to match his family's agricultural labour with the labour of his pen, are overwhelmed by the weight of wistful description before them, in which Heaney admires the farming capabilities of his father and grandfather. 'Follower', like 'Whitby-Sur-Moyola', brings together art and working the land in a single metaphor; but it highlights the separateness and mutual strangeness that exists between those two occupations more than it manages to bind them together. In his portrayal of Caedmon, however, Heaney

⁸⁴ A similarly stark contrast between physical gesture and its purpose is found in the mother's baptismal 'ducking' of her baby in 'Limbo'.

achieves what he has been unable to with himself as overt subject, under the scrutiny of his own ancestors: he unites labour and poetry, the fleshly and the spiritual, in such an unassailable oneness that each is imbued with the qualities of the other as well as their own. The grimy activities of the farmyard become sacred, ‘perfect’, ‘clean’ and ‘full’; and the transcendent vocation of the poet is brought soundly down to earth by Caedmon’s ‘big ignorant roar’, by the prayer of those smelly fingers raised to his nose. Caedmon is wholly man and wholly poet, worker and singer in equal measure.⁸⁵

The vocabulary of ‘Whitby-Sur-Moyola’ is richly evocative of its speaker, its colloquial, narrative style conjuring for us a man no doubt a herdsman himself, certainly someone with experience of farm labour. His use of phrases like ‘angel stint’ and ‘poeting with the harp’ is dismissive in the way one might be dismissive of the unfamiliar, the mysterious, and the awkwardness of the latter phrase is all the more noticeable when compared with the deftness and eloquence of his description of the urine check. The ‘poeting’ seems clumsy, the ‘sniff and test’ rapidly and efficiently graceful; the speaker’s admiration is for, and his familiarity with, Caedmon’s expertise with animals, not his brief aberrance with poetry. In this way, Heaney redresses the original myth and its central emphasis, which is on Caedmon’s spiritual, poetic gift; he does so, too, by writing in the voice of Caedmon’s neighbour, and not his own voice, unavoidably that of a poet rather than a farmer. It is an ultimately inescapable awareness of Heaney’s presence in the poem, however, which layers the last line with additional significance. Even as we hear the voice of that neighbour throughout the poem, we know, because we are reading a poem at all, that Heaney is using his narrative as a means to another end altogether; and that end is so fully achieved by the poem’s conclusion that we hear the voice of Heaney chiming in with that of the character he has created. For the narrator, Caedmon is a genuine herdsman, a man who knows his livestock intimately and cares for them fully; for Heaney, Caedmon is the epitome of ‘poet’, not merely because he is the first English poet, but, more importantly, because he combines poetry and hard labour in

⁸⁵ ‘Poet to Blacksmith’, in *District and Circle*, is a more recent poem on a similar theme, although its emphasis is less on the binary of spiritual and manual labour, and more on the notion of poetry as hard agricultural work. In it, the poet Eoghan Rua Ó Súilleabháin asks the blacksmith Séamus McGearailt to make him a spade – ‘the grain of the wood and the line of the shaft nicely fitted, / and best thing of all, the ring of it, sweet as a bell’ – and we are thus also reminded of Heaney’s first poem on the subject, ‘Digging’. (Heaney, *District and Circle*, 25.)

such a way as to make them a single act – an achievement that Heaney himself has strived for from his very earliest work.

There is redress occurring in two directions at this point: a traditional view of poetry as a rarefied occupation and the speaker's concern with Caedmon as cattle farmer redress each other. The speaker's tendency to see Caedmon's true talent as that of herding and the common view of poetry as an entirely spiritual, ethereal exercise balance each other out to produce 'the real thing' – Caedmon as Heaney, as poet-labourer, metaphorical mucker-in and 'hard as nails'. The whole poem is about balance, about counterweighting, about uniting two seemingly disparate vocations into one. In another sense, the poem's last line redresses the notion of myth; 'real' can mean 'true', and the reader is challenged to accept Bede's myth (and also Heaney's version of it) as true, as a genuine historical account just as he or she is about to set it aside.

The poem's most significant redressing action, however, is in its redressing of poetry as an art form, which I argue it does in a manner quite unlike that which Heaney describes in his prose explanation of that phrase. For Heaney, this kind of redress is concerned primarily with a poem's music, its ability to provide that melodic, rhythmic answer to reality, and its purpose is to establish poetry as a very particular, necessarily autonomous use of language. 'Whitby-Sur-Moyola' accomplishes this, but not primarily by means of its aural qualities (although they are of course there); more plainly, and paradoxically more grandly, it establishes the art form as an independent, essential process by redefining what poetry is. Heaney returns to the earliest story of the very first English poet, a story involving an angel and a blessed transformation from cowhand to poet, and he reshapes it, seizing on the value of Caedmon's yard work and showing that poetry is labour of this very sort, tough and dirty and worthwhile as any manual labour. In this reworking of the myth, he redresses the craft of poetry as thoroughly as one could.

This reworking is achieved fully not least because it differs from other artistic renderings of Caedmon, the best-known of which is Denise Levertov's 1987 poem named after the mythical figure. Levertov's poem is written in the first-person voice of Caedmon, and is a retrospective of his life before the visitation, rather than after:

All others talked as if
talk were a dance.

of lit rush the motes
of gold moving
from shadow to shadow
slow in the wake
of deep untroubled sighs.
The cows
munched or stirred or were still. I
was at home and lonely,
both in good measure. Until
the sudden angel affrighted me – light effacing
my feeble beam,
a forest of torches, feathers of flame, sparks upflying:
but the cows as before
were calm, and nothing was burning,
 nothing but I, as that hand of fire
touched my lips and scorched my tongue
and pulled my voice
 into the ring of the dance.⁸⁶

phasis – and the emphasis, one might say, of even Bede's acc

⁸⁶ Denise Levertov, 'Caedmon', in *The Norton Anthology of Poetry*, ed. Margaret Ferguson, Mary Jo Salter, and Jon Stallworthy, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1996), 1575-6.

intelligence and awareness in his gaze. Furthermore, there is no sense in the speaker's description of Caedmon that he has changed in his abilities since his holy summons – he is celebrated for what he was before and after that period of his life. In a single poem, therefore, Heaney redresses our expectations, our impressions, of a triad: Caedmon in his traditional representation, Heaney himself as a cowman's son and poet, and the art of poetry itself.

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Conclusion

... smile
as you find a rhythm
working you, slow mile by mile,
into your proper haunt
somewhere, well out, beyond...

Seamus Heaney, 'Casualty'¹

I

'Poetrybiz', as Robert Klein Engler puts it, 'is big business' in the United States – and for this reason alone it seems unlikely that the literary defence of poetry will become an obsolete genre in the near future.² Even outside of that thriving, yet segregated racket, poets will inevitably continue to experience the writer's guilt that is, in the instance of Heaney's defence as much as any other, such a powerful motivator for the defender. Recent defences have not, however, added much to the genre.

Jay Parini's *Why Poetry Matters*, published in 2008, is a case in point. In a book whose tone is matter-of-factly declarative throughout, Parini rehearses a few centuries' worth of popular defences in summary form, patch-working writers together in a manner that serves as an excellent foil for Heaney's brilliant marriage and interpretation of many of the same ideas. 'Poetry doesn't matter to most people,' Parini begins. 'That is, most people don't write it, don't read it, and don't have any idea why anybody would spend valuable time doing such a thing'. Even by the end of his introduction, however, he has asserted that poetry in fact *does* matter, because 'without it we can live only partially, not fully conscious of the possibilities (emotional and intellectual) that life affords'.³ The writers whose ideas feature in Parini's discussion are the usual suspects, including Plato, Sidney, and the Modernists. Almost all his ideas, similarly, have a now-familiar ring. Poets are 'responsible for the speech if not the life of their tribe, for they are the custodians of language', and they also provide 'a place to stand where the pressure of reality will not overcome the imagination, thus limiting possibilities'.⁴ Parini covers the entire spectrum in the range of his claims for poetry; the art form is beneficial

¹ Heaney, *Selected Poems*, 103.

² Robert Klein Engler, *The Post-Gloria Essays*, (iUniverse, 2004), 23.

³ Parini, *Why Poetry Matters*, ix, xiv.

⁴ Parini, *Why Poetry Matters*, 128, 21.

intellectually, linguistically, spiritually and psychologically. But the task of proving his central thesis – that poetry matters – by amassing and restating the (mostly well-known) ideas of others proves an impossible one. There is none of the fine discrimination exercised by Heaney, his unfailing ability to select precisely the most effective quotations from the work of others, and Parini's commentary is more a matter of paraphrase than the fusion of interpretation and amplification so characteristic of the Irishman's work. Parini's discussion (for it is not an argument), on the other hand, is somewhat stolid, and one's sense is that – particularly in the wake of Heaney's defence – *Why Poetry Matters* achieves nothing much at all for poetry or for the genre of the defence.

A more focused argument for poetry's place in the world is contained in Robert Pinsky's recent *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*. The American ex-poet laureate advances an argument in this short book which answers, he writes, the problem presented by two opposing kinds of anxiety evoked by the idea of culture. The first of these is the fear of 'undifferentiation, a loss of cultural diversity' resulting from the existence of a single, shared American culture; the second is a fear of a 'vicious, tribalized factionalism', 'fragmentation' caused by a plurality of wholly distinct cultures.⁵ Poetry, Pinsky argues, is the medium through which these anxieties can be allayed, because it holds both the individual and the social within its frame of reference. He goes on to demonstrate the way in which this is so:

lyric poetry has been defined by the unity and concentration of a solitary voice ... It is singular, if not solitary. But the vocality of poetry, involving the mind's energy as it moves toward speech, and toward incantation, also involves the creation of something like – indeed, precisely *like* – a social presence. The solitude of the lyric, almost by the nature of human solitude, invokes a social presence.⁶

In this conception, by its very nature a poem is a social event; while the poem speaks with a particular individual voice, the very facts of its language, its cadences and syntax, summon up the idea of a shared life. Thus, Pinsky invokes a paradox: the 'vocal imagining' that defines poetry, while being the product of an individual in his or her

⁵ Robert Pinsky, *Democracy, Culture and the Voice of Poetry*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002), 4.

⁶ Pinsky, *Democracy*, 18.

solitary labour, is not divorced from the social realm and the idea of society. As such it encapsulates the essence of democracy, which, in his terms, is a balance between the self and the other.⁷ Already we can see that Pinsky's defence falls into the category of those which are answering to an implicit or explicit social, political charge.

Critics have variously described Pinsky's long essay as 'foggy' and 'succinct and sparkling'; in my opinion, both judgements are justified.⁸ The book is certainly interesting, if somewhat repetitive; but set within the tradition of defences of poetry, it falls far short of its predecessors and, I would argue, its most significant contemporary, Heaney. Pinsky's concern seems, as some critics have also observed, fundamentally more political than poetic, and the ultimate importance of his argument *for poetry* is less than obvious. Poetry may indeed be essentially democratic, and on this point Pinsky is certainly convincing. But while the art form may quell a specifically American cultural anxiety to some degree, Pinsky's defence of it does not answer any of the other accusations that poetry faces in the twenty-first century – has faced, indeed, in every century. Moreover, he limits his defence both with his political focus and his national one: he is, perhaps understandably, concerned primarily with American poetry.

There are parallels to be drawn, nonetheless, between Pinsky's position and Heaney's. In his blurb for Pinsky's debut collection of poems, *Sadness and Happiness*, Robert Lowell describes him as 'belonging to that rarest category of talents, the poet-critic', a category which, I argue, Heaney has come to exemplify in his lifetime.⁹ While Heaney holds no official position as Ireland's national poet, he is widely recognised to be that country's favourite son, and, as Cliona Ni Riordain points out in a recent essay, he is in 'a category of his own' in terms of literary fame. In 1997, for example, many Irish people in fact wanted Heaney to put himself forward for election as president.¹⁰ Six years later, in 2003, Amnesty International introduced the annual 'Ambassador of Conscience

⁷ Pinsky, *Democracy*, 39.

⁸ Engler, *The Post-Gloria Essays*, 23; Joel Brouwer, 'The Civic Poet', *New York Times*, February 3, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/02/03/books/review/Brouwer-t.html> (December 29, 2008).

⁹ Qtd in Robert Pinsky, *Sadness and Happiness: Poems*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), back cover.

¹⁰ Cliona Ni Riordain, 'How to Get from the Plough to the Stars: Reception Theory and the Work of Seamus Heaney', in *Cynos* 15.2 (2008). <http://revel.unice.fr/cynos/document.html?id=1588> (December 29, 2008).

Award' which was inspired by one of Heaney's poems, 'The Republic of Conscience'.¹¹ Portraits of Heaney can be bought on the streets in Dublin, and, for a small consideration, performance poets will recite your Heaney poem of choice. In the 1990s – and it may still be the case – Heaney was more popularly taught in English educational syllabi than Shakespeare; and his books continue to account for two-thirds of the sales of living poets in Britain.¹² As Rand Brandes affirms, the degree to which Heaney's work is embraced by the academic world is matched only by the unrelenting media scrutiny of his every professional move.¹³ Heaney is, in short, a 'pop star', and an ambassador for poetry second to none in this historical moment.¹⁴

He has achieved this, in part, by being both highly esteemed by critics and a favourite with the general public; he is reputed to be 'a simple, straightforward, readily accessible writer'.¹⁵ In the wake of the 1995 Nobel Prize for Literature, as one might expect, Heaney's books vanished from the shelves. Faber & Faber, Ni Riordain reports, reminded journalists at the time that Heaney was a consistently popular poet whose books inevitably went into reprint.

But even Faber must have been astonished to see his book of critical essays on poetry, *The Redress of Poetry*, enter the bestseller lists at number five, jostling up there alongside Lester Kignott who was a length ahead at number four, with Delia Smith leading the field at number one [with] her trusty *Winter Collection* ... Dizzy heights indeed for a form which represents only 2% of annual sales in the book trade.¹⁶

Joel Brouwer might be able to say with confidence of Robert Pinsky that 'no other living American poet — no other living American, probably — has done so much to put poetry before the public eye'; but his confidence surely rests on that careful geographical

¹¹ 'Seamus Heaney', Art for Amnesty, (2004). http://www.artforamnesty.org/view_artist.php?id=4 (30 December 2008). The first recipient of the Ambassador of Conscience Award was Václav Havel, and in 2006 Nelson Mandela became an 'Ambassador of Conscience'.

¹² Seamus Heaney, interview by Jenny McCartney, *The Telegraph*, September 21, 2007. <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/3667860/Seamus-Heaney-has-seen-it-all.html> (February 3, 2009.)

¹³ Rand Brandes, 'Secondary Sources: A Gloss on the Critical Reception of Seamus Heaney 1965-1993', in *Colby Quarterly* 30.1 (1994): 63.

¹⁴ O'Brien, 'Ways of Seeing Things', 176.

¹⁵ Morrison, *Seamus Heaney*, 11.

¹⁶ Ni Riordain, 2008.

distinction.¹⁷ Globally speaking, Heaney is, indeed, in a league of his own. He has – both, no doubt, to his benefit and to his detriment – been saddled with the uneasy distinction of being everybody’s celebrity poet in a culture obsessed with fame and stardom. The almost automatic exposure, and indeed boosting of his work, whether poetry or prose, cannot be gainsaid. Heaney has attained a status such that he has literally come to be identified with poetry, in the same way that Oprah Winfrey is identified with talk-show television. None of this can be laid at the poet’s own door. As the argument of this thesis has attempted to demonstrate, there are very real reasons for his distinction, not to say his pre-eminence. In any case, Heaney himself has constantly tried to shoulder off the particular mantle of celebrity as diplomatically as possible, confessing, in an interview with Dennis O’Driscoll, that it is both ‘joy’ and ‘burdening’.¹⁸

Clearly this celebrity status cannot have played no role at all in the prominence of Heaney’s critical writing. It does not account, however, for the extraordinary salience of his best ideas and most acute perceptions; these would retain that salience whether he was in the public eye or not. Doubtless more attention should be paid to the fact that, when an art form is in eclipse, it is all too convenient for one person to come to stand, sound-byte style, for that art form itself – at least in the eyes of the general public. This is a way of having your cake and not merely eating it, but eating it in one bite. Heaney has, no matter how reluctantly, been billed as the most readily consumerable face of poetry. The actual mechanisms of this, and their full implications, await a further study.

II

Adam Zagajewski’s ‘A Defense of Ardor’ is in part a defence of poetry’s defenders, specifically those who are prepared to represent the art ardently. This thesis has taken something of the same form, a defence of a defence, as I have considered the significance of what Heaney has accomplished for poetry and how he has done so. There are parts of the project deserving of further exploration, which obvious constraints, length primarily, have prevented me from conducting here. Among these is Heaney’s use of the auditory imagination, the connection he draws between our humanity and our exposure to the

¹⁷ Brouwer, 2008.

¹⁸ Heaney, *Stepping Stones*, 369.

primordial sounds of poetry – a connection that, as I have indicated, is the aspect of his argument most frequently criticised by commentators. The issue deserves a further chapter of its own, and a measure of close attention that I have been unable to afford it here. It would be rewarding, for instance, to examine the notion in light of psychoacoustic research – that is, research into the ‘psychology of sound’ – and as well as anthropological findings regarding the use of sound in religious and other rites.¹⁹ The relationship between ritual chanting, including traditional liturgical repetition, and the effects of poetic music could prove an interesting field for comparative study.²⁰

Heaney himself provides numerous examples of his defence in practice, citing those poets and poems which exemplify that which the art form ought to (and does) accomplish, and in Chapter 5 I have demonstrated how a sampling of Heaney’s own poems does likewise. A glance at Heaney’s favoured exemplars immediately reveals that his focus is, primarily, lyric poetry, and it has been suggested that one of his critical objectives is in fact to ‘define lyric poetry itself, to say what kind of *thing* it is’.²¹ He does not address, for instance, what so many other commentators have drawn attention to: namely, that poetry is not always found in poems as such. One suspects he might concede that there is, in fact, a kind of poetry in, for instance, the lyrics of Bob Dylan, as there might well be in the lyrics of hip-hop and other modern pop music. But one of the perhaps unintended consequences of Heaney’s particular focus – which is, as I have said, lyric poetry over the last five centuries, and mostly in the English tradition – is the degree to which it reveals that, however our definitions of poetry might vary, it is more abundantly, as well as more satisfyingly, present in the traditional poetic forms than in other places. Though he does not provide us at any point with a reading, for instance, of Dylan’s ‘Visions of Johanna’ (from the latter’s *Blonde on Blonde*), one has every reason for suspecting that he would not find in it, divorced from Dylan’s music, those endlessly resonant properties – thus meaningfulness – that become apparent when he offers us a reading of an Elizabeth Bishop lyric. In this regard, it might be said that Heaney’s

¹⁹ Stefanos A. Iakovides et al, ‘Psychophysiology and Psychoacoustics of Music: Perception of Complex Sound in Normal Subjects and Psychiatric Patients’, in *Annals of General Hospital Psychiatry* 3.6, (2004). <http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=400748> (January 2, 2009); Anthony Jackson, ‘Sound and Ritual’, in *Man*, New Series, 3.2, (1968): 293-299.

²⁰ Marco Haverkort and Jan H. de Roder, ‘Poetry, Language, and Ritual Performance’, in *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 4.2 (2003): 269-286.

²¹ O’Donoghue, *The Language of Poetry*, 144.

orientation is fundamentally a conservative one. But, as sometimes happens with such orientations, the conservative stance (if that is what it is) produces for us, the readers, some radically convincing results.

Of course, this raises questions about the degree to which Heaney's defence is a defence of *all* poetry, and to what degree its criteria hold for poetry that is not fundamentally lyrical. My own view is that Heaney's defence very deliberately does not embrace everything called 'poetry' in the current era, and that it is advisedly exclusive in this one sense – although not necessarily limited, I think, to lyric poetry. His adherence to the canonical – or 'almost-canonical' – is not because of a backward longing. It is within the tradition of the last seven hundred years or so that poetry, if it is to be found, will be unearthed, or not at all. Such would seem to be his implicit line of reasoning. Heaney responds, as much as Sidney or Eliot did, to the unique pressures of his time, and recognising the degree to which his defence denies, as much as affirms, different kinds of writing is another area deserving of further discussion.²²

III

In 1990, the year he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, Octavio Paz published *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry*, in which he also considers the current state and future prospects of poetry.

Sociologists, academics, journalists and managing editors tell us that they are armed with irrefutable statistics. Pointing to statistics, they maintain that poetry is an art destined to disappear or become yet another curiosity in the museum of antiques. They have boldly formulated a sort of law of the progressive decline of poetry: poems have fewer readers today than they did thirty years ago, and thirty years ago they had fewer readers than they did seventy years ago, and so on, back through time.²³

Using Donald Hall's foreword to *The Best American Poetry, 1989*, however, Paz demonstrates that poetry is in fact better off than it has been in some decades – sales are higher than they were in the 1950s, and there has been a surge in the popularity and

²² Corcoran, 214.

²³ Paz, 'The Few and the Many', 82-83.

regularity of public readings.²⁴ Those predicting poetry's demise have forgotten, he claims, that literature in the Western world has historically been characterised by minority movements, small groups of writers who were responsible for revolutionising the art form.²⁵ Our current skewed perspective of poetry's status is a result of the economic lens through which we now view the arts. The expansion of the publishing industry, its domination by corporations, has resulted in the metamorphosis of traditional artistic exchange into a 'modern financial market'. Simultaneously, individuals have become consumers. Paz insists, furthermore, that 'the logic of the marketplace is not the logic of literature'.²⁶ The real value of a poem is not monetary, and has nothing to do with profit and loss, with bestseller lists and rates of sale. Rather, that value lies in poetry's ability to connect us with our past and our future, to guide us through the present with a sense of what has been and what will be.²⁷ In the current ethos of consumption, that ability is compromised.

What, then, are poetry's prospects for the twenty-first century? Paz, like many another writer, wisely decides not to offer a clear prediction; rather, his depiction of poetry's place in the contemporary world is, as he is concerned to point out, a sketch:

no, poetry is not in the throes of death. It gives the impression that it is tired, or even suffering from a certain sterility; and, true, for the first time since the Romantic era, no poetic movement of major scope has appeared in thirty years. But the same can be said of the other arts. This phenomenon has not prevented the appearance of good poets and artists: every generation produces its own.²⁸

Poetry's essential purposes remain what they have always been – to elucidate and give structure to our daily experience of life; to bring to our attention, persistently, those realities which we would ignore or conceal from ourselves; and to reflect our potential as human beings, individually and as a society.²⁹ In so doing, Paz writes, poetry becomes 'the antidote to technology and the market', the latter an invention which must, like all such creations, run its course. If we are, in the face of the world economy that now

²⁴ Paz, 'The Few and the Many', 84.

²⁵ Octavio Paz, 'Quantity and Quality', in *The Other Voice: Essays on Modern Poetry*, trans. H. Lane, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1990), 112.

²⁶ Paz, 'Quantity and Quality', 118, 112.

²⁷ Paz, 'Quantity and Quality', 115-116.

²⁸ Paz, 119.

²⁹ Paz, 133, 155, 158.

imbues every aspect of our lives, to retain that within us which is most human and least quantifiable, we must look to poetry.³⁰

As a writer myself, and as a reader of poetry, I share some of the gloom of the number-wielding sociologists and academics, some of the fear – which Paz acknowledges as common to every generation – that ours will produce no groundbreaking, significant literary movement. That fear, however, as Paz points out, is unfounded precisely because it is characteristic of every century; and, to my view, it also places undue emphasis on literary innovation, on artistic revolution. My own poetic tastes veer towards the lyric, in its neo-Romantic, Heaneyesque conception. Radical novelty is not really to my taste, and Heaney's defence demonstrates, in its wider implications, how very incidental such novelty is, anyway, to the achievement of a poem. Poetry's *raison d'être* has always been the same, although it has never, as I have argued, been as fully and memorably expressed as it is in Heaney's work. His defence, ultimately, is more than an answer to the charges against poetry. It is the culmination of centuries' worth of debate about the art form, a manifesto with sufficient heft, I believe, to withstand the gravity of the century before us, as well as confront the further challenges that will undoubtedly face the art form in the future. Changes in form and rhythm, in vocabulary and perspective, are, in a lasting sense, mere fripperies compared with poetry's fundamental purpose. Poems that accomplish redress, that embody the ungoverned tongue and above all celebrate the efficacy of song itself, have been written in every age, and will continue to be written. Indeed, the purpose of Seamus Heaney's defence is not only to prove the validity of poetry as an historical art form, but to suggest that poetry itself is an archetype (I use the term here in the loose, descriptive sense); which is to say, it is generically, genetically human, and indeed part of any adequate description of what it means to be human.

So memorably resonant are Heaney's own formulations of the way in which poetry operates that one is tempted, in conclusion, to break with the conventions of academic citation and isolate (even if this involves repetition) those key formulations on which his defence turns:

³⁰ Paz, 159-160.

... the cultural depth-charges latent in certain words and rhythms, that binding secret between words in poetry that delights not just the ear but the whole backward and abyss of mind and body; ... the energies beating in and between words that the poet brings into half-deliberate play; ... the relationship between the word as pure vocable, as articulate noise, and the word as etymological occurrence, as symptom of human history, memory and attachments.

... the efficacy of song itself, an emblem of the poet as potent sound-wave; and when one thinks of the note of the soprano which cracks glass, one has yet another image of the way purely artistic utterance can put a crack into the officially moulded shape of truth in a totalitarian society.

Art is not an inferior reflection of some ordained heavenly system but a rehearsal of it in earthly terms; art does not trace the given map of a better reality but improvises an inspired sketch of it.

in the activity of poetry too, there is a tendency to place a counter-reality in the scales – a reality which may only be imagined but which nevertheless has weight because it is imagined within the gravitational pull of the actual and can therefore hold its own and balance out against the historical situation.

... in the rift between what is going to happen and whatever we would wish to happen, poetry holds attention for a space, functions not as distraction but as pure concentration, a focus where our power to concentrate is concentrated back on ourselves.

Heaney himself has proceeded throughout his career by using liberally the principle of exemplification. Looking over these quotations again, one realises afresh that not only are they unfailingly illuminating as to the point and purpose of poetry, but they are themselves, in fact, touchstones as steadfast as any others available to us in this contemporary moment.

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